

Reformation Heritage and the Question of *Sachkritik*: Theological Criticism of the Bible

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A new era in Protestant theology was inaugurated with the publication of Karl Barth's ground-breaking commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans (1919, 1922).¹ This historical judgment is in keeping with the impact that Barth himself hoped the book would have on his contemporaries. Negatively, he intended it to signal a break with the regnant historical-critical method of biblical exegesis ("historicism") that had characterized liberal Protestant theology in the nineteenth century. Positively, he aspired to recover the sort of "theological exegesis" of Scripture exemplified by Luther and Calvin in the sixteenth century. Distinctively twentieth-century Protestant theology thus began with Barth's critique of one approach to biblical exegesis coupled with his call for retrieval of another approach. Both critique and retrieval stood in the service of his overriding concern to make the Bible central again to the preaching and theology of his own day much as it had been to that of the Reformers.

Among Barth's contemporaries enthusiastically endorsing his call for theological exegesis of Scripture was Rudolf Bultmann, who wrote a favorable review of Barth's Romans commentary. Although the two men would later find themselves on opposite sides of the controversy ignited by Bultmann's call for a demythologizing of the New Testament, they were initially allies in challenging the hegemony of historicism in biblical studies. Notwithstanding this early agreement, however, it soon became apparent that there was serious disagreement between them as to what exactly was entailed in the implementation of their shared aspiration for theological exegesis of the Bible.

The issue turned on the question of the necessity and appropriateness of what is called in German *Sachkritik*, usually translated into English as "content criticism" or "material criticism." *Sachkritik* refers to theological criticism of biblical statements according to the strictly immanent criterion of the Bible's own subject matter (*Sache*) to which the biblical writers were beholden. Even though Barth explicitly acknowledged the legitimacy of *Sachkritik* in principle, he was reluctant to undertake it in fact. Here Bult-

1. It was in its second edition from 1922 that Barth's book made its decisive and lasting impact. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933; reprint, 1975).

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mann perceived an inconsistency in Barth's practice, since Barth had opened the door to *Sachkritik* in his Romans commentary (even if he himself refused to walk through it, a point to which Bultmann drew attention in his review). The seeds of their later disagreement over the program of demythologizing were sown in this earlier debate over the meaning of *Sachkritik*.

Although the term *Sachkritik* is a modern designation, what it designates is not.² As both Barth and Bultmann were aware, its *locus classicus* is found in Martin Luther's critical handling of certain biblical texts, most famously in his rejection of the canonical standing of James. Not surprisingly, Luther's willingness to criticize the Bible was controversial even among many Protestants in the sixteenth century. John Calvin, for all his sympathies with Luther's theology, refused to follow Luther in this respect. Like Calvin, Barth sought to read the entire canon of Scripture as a unity, whereas Bultmann, like Luther, saw himself obligated to subject Scripture to criticism on behalf of the gospel to which it bears witness.³ Since Bultmann was a Lutheran whereas Barth was

2. See the excellent article by Robert Morgan, "Sachkritik in Reception History," in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33:2 (2010):175-90.

3. For the purposes of this article our discussion is focused solely on the question of the theological criticism of the New Testament since, from a historical-critical perspective, it is not proper to speak of "the gospel" in the Jewish Scriptures (Old Testament). *Sachkritik* as here employed refers to criticism of the texts of the New Testament in the name of the gospel to which they seek to bear faithful witness. Whether and how a corresponding *Sachkritik* of the Old Testament could be

a Calvinist, their debate in the matter of *Sachkritik* can be viewed as a modern reprise of the earlier difference between Luther and Calvin. Furthermore, an examination of this debate can illumine the basic tension between these two divergent approaches to the Bible that have characterized Protestantism from its inception. It can also clarify the fundamental choice between them that has to be made by Protestants yet today, who must decide what the genuine legacy of the Reformation is on the question of the Bible and theology.

Theological exegesis between historicism and biblicism: Bultmann's debate with Barth

Although Barth was educated in Germany under some of the finest liberal theologians of his era, he ultimately revolted against the tradition of his teachers, thereby initiating two influential movements in twentieth-century theology: "dialectical theology" and "neo-orthodoxy."⁴ Beginning with Schleiermacher, the liberal or "mediating" theology (*Vermittlungstheologie*) of the nineteenth century had aimed at a synthesis between the Reformation tradition and the Enlightenment. Its guiding question: What does it mean to be Protestant Christian in the light of a modern scientific understanding of nature and a fully historical understanding of religion, including the religion of the Bible? However, after World War I had undermined confidence in the basic goodness and rationality of modern civilization, Barth charged that liberal theology's claim to stand in the authentic line of the Reformers was fraudulent on account of its accommodation to modernity.

Part and parcel of this indictment was Barth's critique that historical-critical exegesis, which had grown up in the closest connection with liberal theology, was unsuited to deal with the Bible's distinctive subject matter that is supposed to find appropriate contemporary expression in preaching. As a corrective, Barth and his early comrades in the dialectical theology movement charted a new path forward for Protestant theology that was neither liberal nor conservative in the usual senses but instead was intended to transcend this antithesis altogether. Aside from recovering certain material themes in the Reformers' theology (for example, the radical transcendence of God, the pervasiveness of human sin, and God's judgment), they also sought to revive the Reformers' way of reading the Bible, however, without repudiating the genuine insights into the historical character of the Bible that had been won by modern historical-critical labor. Herein lay both the movement's greatness and its greatest ambiguity.

Barth began his career as a pastor who endeavored to take seriously the task of the preaching office as this is understood in

undertaken, apart from the imposition of categories derived from the New Testament, is an important question but cannot be pursued here.

4. Whether "neo-orthodoxy" is the best term by which to characterize Barth's later theology is not a debate I wish to enter. In any case, it should not be thought that Barth simply repristinated Protestant orthodoxy. Against any such misunderstanding it should be noted that Barth's doctrinal revisions of orthodox Protestantism were as far-reaching as Schleiermacher's.

While the standard historical commentaries set out to interpret Paul in his first-century context, Barth's commentary had another aim altogether. It sought to understand what Paul would say to the people of the twentieth century.

the Reformed tradition: *ministerium divini verbi*.⁵ Accordingly, the pastor is primarily a servant, a minister, called to proclaim God's Word whenever preaching a sermon upon a biblical text. But Barth's formal theological education had not prepared him to interpret Scripture so that it might be heard as the Word of God addressed to his congregation. He could explain what a biblical text *meant* within its original historical context, but he could not say what it *means* on Sunday morning. Barth depicted his plight in these terms:

I myself know what it means year in year out to mount the steps of the pulpit, conscious of the responsibility to understand and to interpret, and longing to fulfill it; and yet, utterly incapable, because at the University I had never been brought beyond that well-known 'Awe in the presence of History' which means in the end no more than that all hope of engaging in the dignity of understanding and interpretation has been surrendered. . . . It was this miserable situation that compelled me as a pastor to undertake a more precise understanding and interpretation of the Bible.⁶

Whereas historical-critical exegesis treats the Bible as a document of the ancient history of religion, Barth's commentary on Romans was offered by way of contrast as an example of what an authentically theological exegesis that takes the Bible seriously as Scripture might look like: "The purpose of this book. . . is to direct [readers] to Holy Scripture, to the Epistle of Paul to the Romans, in order that, whether they be delighted or annoyed. . . they may at least be brought face to face with the subject matter of the Scriptures."⁷

While the standard historical commentaries set out to interpret Paul in his first-century context, Barth's commentary had another aim altogether. It sought to understand what Paul would say to the people of the twentieth century.

5. Barth, "Author's Preface to the English Edition," *Epistle to the Romans*, x.

6. Barth, "Preface to the Second Edition," *Epistle to the Romans*, 9.

7. Barth, "Author's Preface to the English Edition," *Epistle to the Romans*, x.

Paul, as a child of his age, addressed his contemporaries. It is, however, far more important that...he veritably speaks to all men of every age. The differences between then and now, there and here, no doubt require careful investigation and consideration. But the purpose of such investigation can only be to demonstrate that these differences are, in fact, purely trivial. The historical-critical method of Biblical investigation has its rightful place: it is concerned with the preparation of the intelligence—and this can never be superfluous. But, were I driven to choose between it and the venerable doctrine of Inspiration, I should without hesitation adopt the latter, which has a broader, deeper, more important justification.... Fortunately, I am not compelled to choose between the two.... If we rightly understand ourselves, our problems are the problems of Paul.⁸

Two things are of interest here. *First*, although Barth had to defend himself against the accusation that he was “an enemy of historical criticism,” he upheld its validity. For him, the Bible is not a collection of the very words of God, as Protestant orthodoxy or fundamentalism would have it. Indeed, Barth was an enemy of biblicism: the belief that the Bible is inerrant and thus authoritative because it is a verbally inspired text. In his view, the Bible is in every respect a human book that is justifiably subject to historical inquiry. For this reason, Barth did not oppose the results of modern historical-critical research, much to the chagrin of conservative Protestants.⁹ But he did maintain that a *merely* historical approach to the Bible is insufficient since it can deal only with the human religion reflected in the Bible but not the God to whom the biblical writers intended to bear witness.¹⁰

Second, Barth couched his criticism of the reigning liberal historicism in terms of an argument on behalf of a more thoroughgoing historical approach to exegesis, declaring: “The critical historian needs to be more critical.”¹¹

I have nothing whatever to say against historical criticism. I recognize it, and once more state quite definitely that it is both necessary and justified. My complaint is that recent commentators confine themselves to an interpretation of the text which seems to me to be no commentary at all, but merely the first step towards a commentary. Recent commentaries contain no more than a reconstruction of the text, a rendering of the Greek words and phrases by their precise equivalents, a number of additional notes in which archaeological and philological material is gathered together, and a more or less plausible arrangement of the material in such a manner that it may be made historically and psychologically intelligible.... *Historians do not wish, and rightly do not wish, to be confined within such narrow limits.*¹²

Accordingly, the truly critical historian wants “to press beyond this preliminary work to an understanding of Paul,” which “involves more than a mere repetition...of what Paul says” because “it involves the reconstruction of what is set out in the Epistle, until the actual meaning of it is disclosed.”¹³

In this view the historian’s task goes beyond a purely positivistic view, since it includes articulating the text’s meaning for today.¹⁴ Surprisingly, Barth’s examples of the more thoroughgoing historical approach that he wished to commend are taken not from modern historians at all but from the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century.

By genuine understanding and interpretation I mean that creative energy which Luther exercised with intuitive certainty in his exegesis; which underlies the systematic

8. Barth, “Preface to the First Edition,” *Epistle to the Romans*, 5.
 9. Barth has been met with hostility by fundamentalists who reject historical criticism and with ambivalence by evangelicals who accept historical criticism only with severe qualifications. Cornelius Van Til, for instance, renders this completely negative verdict on Barth: “The present writer is of the opinion that, for all its verbal similarities to historic Protestantism, Barth’s theology is, in effect, a denial of it.... The choice must therefore be made between Barth and the Reformers.” *Christianity and Barthianism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1962), vii, 445. For a more appreciative yet still critical assessment, see Mark D. Thompson, “Witness to the Word: On Barth’s Doctrine of Scripture,” in *Engaging with Barth: Contemporary Evangelical Critiques*, eds. David Gibson and Daniel Strange (New York and London: T. & T. Clark, 2008), 168-197. As an evangelical, Thompson is troubled by those aspects of Barth’s doctrine of Scripture derived from “the historical and theological criticism of nineteenth-century liberalism” that “survived his revolution” (197). Michael S. Horton also thinks that Barth has a flawed notion of the orthodox doctrine of inspiration and insists that “a doctrine of Scripture adequate to the Bible’s own claims for itself has not yet been offered by Barth or his students.” “A Stony Jar: The Legacy of Karl Barth for Evangelical Theology,” in *Engaging with Barth*, 364.
 10. Barth explained: “The Bible is a literary monument of an ancient racial religion and of a Hellenistic cultus religion of the Near East. A human document like any other, it can lay no a priori dogmatic claim to special attention and consideration.... For it is too clear that intelligent and fruitful discussion of the Bible begins when the

judgment as to its human, its historical and psychological character has been made and put behind us.... The special content of this human document, the remarkable something with which the writers of these stories and those who stood behind them were concerned, the Biblical object—this is the question that will engage and engross us.” “Biblical Questions, Insights, and Vistas,” in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (1928; repr., Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1978), 60–61.
 11. Barth, “Preface to the Second Edition,” *Epistle to the Romans*, 6.
 12. *Ibid.*, (italics added).
 13. *Ibid.*, 6–7. Eberhard Jüngel clarifies Barth’s point: “If the Bible is to have meaning, then what is there must be ‘not only...repeated,’ but ‘rethought.’” *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, trans. Garrett E. Paul (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 77.
 14. Barth’s statements about the genuine historical task anticipate the idea, now common in hermeneutical discussion, about “the fusion of horizons” (Gadamer) between past and present. Indeed, the hermeneutical character of Barth’s view comes to expression when he states: “The understanding of history is an uninterrupted conversation between the wisdom of yesterday and the wisdom of tomorrow.” “Preface to the First Edition,” *Epistle to the Romans*, 5.

interpretation of Calvin.... How energetically Calvin, having first established what stands in the text, sets himself to re-think the whole material and to wrestle with it, till the walls which separate the sixteenth century from the first become transparent! Paul speaks, and the man of the sixteenth century hears. The conversation between the original record and the reader moves round the subject-matter, until a distinction between yesterday and today becomes impossible.¹⁵

What Barth means is that theological exegesis is not really distinct from historical exegesis—except in its modern truncated and eviscerated form!—so much as it is an exegesis that is so penetrating in its grasp of the text’s subject matter that the temporal distance between the historical context of the ancient author and the modern reader is thereby bridged.

When we look more closely at what exactly is involved for Barth in “understanding and interpretation” of a text, we learn that, in addition to giving a contemporary reformulation of the text’s basic point, the exegete must be ready to engage in “criticism” of what the text says in the light of what it means: “Criticism (κρίνειν) applied to historical documents means for me the measuring of words and phrases by the standard of that about which the documents are speaking.”¹⁶ This is a perfect statement of *Sachkritik*: testing the words of the text according to its subject matter (*Sache*). Such criticism presupposes a willingness to face up to “the tension displayed more or less clearly in the ideas written in the text.”¹⁷ The text is thus interpreted critically according to its own inner norm. Another designation for this procedure is “internal criticism” as distinct from “external criticism.” Whereas an external criticism judges a text by a standard foreign to itself, *Sachkritik* is internal: it holds a text accountable to its own norm of excellence. So, for example, an external criticism evaluates Paul’s letters according to a norm derived from another viewpoint than that to which Paul saw himself beholden (for example, non-Christian Judaism or Stoicism); an internal criticism, however, tests Paul’s writings by the criterion that he himself acknowledged: the gospel (Rom 1:1, 16; 2:16). There is, moreover, nothing specifically theological in this procedure, since it can be applied to any serious text to test its internal consistency and adequacy in expressing its subject matter (*sachgemäß*).¹⁸

As Barth explained to a puzzled readership trying to make sense of this new sort of biblical commentary: “For me...the ques-

Like Barth, Bultmann believed it was necessary to push beyond historicism’s method of using biblical texts as sources to reconstruct early Christianity as a phenomenon of ancient history, in order that the way might be cleared for the New Testament to address the reader (or hearer) with its claims.

tion of the true nature of interpretation is the supreme question.”¹⁹ And the final goal of the interpretation of any text is to be brought face to face with the subject matter itself: *die Sache selbst*.

The Word ought to be exposed in the words. Intelligent comment means that I am driven on till I stand with nothing before me but the enigma of the matter; till the document seems hardly to exist as a document; till I have almost forgotten that I am not its author; till I know the author so well that I allow him to speak in my name and am even able to speak in his name myself.²⁰

Barth’s commentary, in which Paul’s subject matter was rethought and translated anew into the language of the twentieth century, was the “*fait accompli* that has called forth the hermeneutical reflection of our times.”²¹ Its promise lay in the proposal of a conception for theological exegesis of Scripture that bridged the gap between yesterday and today (thus moving decisively beyond historicism) without, however, denying the genuine insights into the historical character of the Bible that had been attained by modern scholarship (thus resisting any relapse into biblicism).

Bultmann found himself in substantial agreement with the program for theological exegesis laid out by Barth, apparently somewhat to Barth’s surprise, since Bultmann was a not only a consummate practitioner of historical-critical method in the study of the New Testament but also an heir to the “history-of-religions school” that represented the epitome of historicism.²² Like Barth, Bultmann believed it was necessary to push beyond historicism’s method of using biblical texts as sources to reconstruct early Christianity as a phenomenon of ancient history, in order that the way might be cleared for the New Testament to address the reader

15. Barth, “The Preface to the Second Edition,” *Epistle to the Romans*, 7.

16. Barth, “Preface to the Second Edition,” *Epistle to the Romans*, 8.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., 12. Barth did not understand himself to be proposing a “special” theological hermeneutic for the exegesis of biblical texts but as reflecting upon what is involved in the exegesis of every humanly significant text, including “the study of Lao-Tse and Goethe” (Ibid.). Hence, the Bible is to be interpreted as any other book, which means according to its subject matter (*Sache*).

19. Ibid., 9.

20. Ibid., 8.

21. James M. Robinson, “Hermeneutic Since Barth,” in *Language, Hermeneutic, and History: Theology after Barth and Bultmann* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2008), 87.

22. Barth, “Preface to the Third Edition,” *Epistle to the Romans*, 16.

(or hearer) with its claims. Whereas the method of the modern historian requires that the exegete adopt a posture of critical distance and objectivity toward the text, so as not to fall victim to anachronism, the text itself seeks to engage the interpreter's subjectivity, since its subject matter concerns the question of how human beings are to understand their own existence. Historicism operates "with the presupposition...that it is possible to interpret the text without, at the same time, interpreting its subject matter."²³ But this is false because "every word we utter about history is necessarily a word about ourselves."²⁴ As historical beings, the study of history is necessarily self-involving (*tua res agitur*): "historical interpretation is also self-interpretation."²⁵ For this reason "there is no neutral exegesis" since "the interpretation of the text always goes hand in hand with the exegete's interpretation of himself."²⁶ So Bultmann draws this contrast between historicism and a theological exegesis: "Historical exegesis asks: 'What is said?' We ask: 'What is meant?'"²⁷

Notwithstanding his praise for Barth and endorsement of Barth's intention, Bultmann was not uncritical of Barth—or, more precisely, of what he perceived to be inconsistencies on Barth's part. In his review of the second edition of Barth's *Romans*, Bultmann prefaced his objection to Barth's exegetical practice with this dual affirmation of the common ground that united them:

As it is self-evident for him that the philological historical explanation of the text is a necessary side of exegesis, it is self-evident to me that a text can be explained only when one has an inner relationship to the matter with which the text deals.²⁸

23. Rudolf Bultmann, "The Problem of a Theological Exegesis of the New Testament," in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, ed. James M. Robinson, trans. Keith R. Crim and Louis De Grazia (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), 238.

24. *Ibid.*, 242.

25. *Ibid.*, 238, 245.

26. *Ibid.*, 242.

27. *Ibid.*, 239. This kind of exegesis, focused on the subject matter (*Sachhexegese*), "comes to what is meant only through what is said, and yet measures what is said by what is meant" (*Sachkritik*), *Ibid.*, 241.

28. Bultmann, "Karl Barth's *Epistle to the Romans* in its Second Edition," in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, 118. Robinson clarifies that for Barth—as now also for Bultmann—"the view of subject to object basic to the critical historical method, to the effect that the subjective element is to be eliminated so as to attain the highest possible objectivity, has been relativized by the basic recognition of the hermeneutical relevance of the subject.... The question with regard to the subject is not simply whether he can eliminate his subjectivity as a source of prejudice, but whether he 'understands himself aright,' i.e., whether he is grappling with what is 'serious,' or, as we might say today, whether he is asking the right question, whether his concern is with the ultimate. If that be the case, his subjectivity provides an access to the subject matter of the text that is indispensable as a heuristic medium of interpretation, if it is really that subject matter, serious both then and now, that he is seeking to understand. One's subjectivity does not simply introduce distortions; it insures that the phenomena with which the text was grappling—if it is a serious text—are not overlooked or distorted into curiosities." "Hermeneutic since Barth," 88.

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Nonetheless, Bultmann reproached Barth for doing exegetical violence to Paul's Letter to the Romans. Barth's justifiable insistence that interpretation must measure the words in the text by its subject matter "cannot, if one is in earnest, occur without criticism."

The requisite criticism is not attempted "from a standpoint taken outside the text and its subject matter," which Bultmann, in full agreement with Barth, rejected; rather, "it is the consistent carrying out of the basic principle," enunciated by Barth, "of understanding the text on the basis of the subject matter."²⁹

One must measure by the subject matter to what extent in all the words and sentences of the text the subject matter has really found adequate expression, for what else can be meant by "measuring"? In Barth, however, I find nothing of such measuring and of the radical criticism based on it. It is impossible to assume that everywhere in the Letter to the Romans the subject matter must have found adequate expression, unless one intends to establish a modern dogma of inspiration, and something like this seems to stand behind Barth's exegesis—to the detriment of the clarity of the subject matter itself.³⁰

Here Bultmann saw his reproach of Barth to be a strictly internal criticism: holding Barth to his own avowed principles of exegesis and interpretation. Because "the subject matter [the gospel] is greater than the word which interprets it [Paul's Letter to the Romans]," Bultmann declared that "no man—not even Paul—can always speak only from the subject matter itself."³¹ In Paul "there are other spirits speaking besides the *pneuma Christou*"; for this reason, "criticism can never be radical enough." Indeed, "such criticism can only serve to clarify the subject matter."

When I discover in my exegesis of Romans tensions and contradictions, heights and depths, when I endeavor to show where Paul is dependent on Jewish theology or on popular Christianity, on Hellenistic enlightenment or Hellenistic sacramental beliefs, then I am practicing not only philological historical criticism...but I am... showing where and how the subject matter is expressed,

29. Bultmann, "Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*," in *Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, 119.

30. *Ibid.*, 119.

31. *Ibid.*, 120.

in order to grasp the subject matter, which is greater even than Paul....Such criticism therefore is—it follows from Barth's own basic premise of "measuring by the subject matter"—inseparable from exegesis and real history. Only in such criticism can the historical work attain its final goal, in which it meets systematic theology which has traveled on another road....³²

Sachkritik, in other words, is what makes historical exegesis of the text truly theological!

Barth, however, strongly objected to Bultmann's criticism that he failed to go far enough:

Bultmann complains that I am too conservative.... Bultmann further goes on to hint that there lurks behind my whole method of exegesis a 'modern form of the dogma of Inspiration'....I have never attempted to conceal the fact that my manner of interpretation has certain affinities with the old doctrine of Verbal Inspiration.³³

But did Barth and Bultmann mean the same thing here by "inspiration"? Barth's original comment that he would unhesitatingly adopt the doctrine of inspiration over historicism, were he forced to choose between them, clearly meant no more than that Paul, though a figure of the distant past, could still speak to us today.³⁴ Bultmann, however, suspected that Barth tacitly assumed the doctrine of a verbally inspired text in the manner of biblicism because of his unwillingness to engage in the *Sachkritik*, for which he himself had originally called. He thought this insofar as only based on this doctrine can one proceed as through the *Sache* ("the spirit of Christ") to arrive at an adequate expression in Paul's words. Curiously, Barth replied by denying that there are any words of Paul's "which are not words of 'those other spirits'" whether Jewish or Hellenistic.

Is it really legitimate to extract a certain number of passages and claim that there the veritable Spirit of Christ has spoken? Or, to put it another way, can the Spirit of Christ be thought of as standing in the Epistle side by side with 'other' spirits and in competition with them? It seems to me impossible to set the Spirit of Christ—the veritable subject-matter of the Epistle—over against other spirits, in such a manner as to deal out praise to some passages, and to depreciate others where Paul is not controlled by his true subject-matter.³⁵

32. Bultmann, "Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*," in *Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, 120.

33. Barth, "Preface to the Third Edition," *Epistle to the Romans*, 16, 18.

34. Barth, "Preface to the First Edition," *Epistle to the Romans*, 5.

35. Barth, "Preface to the Third Edition," *Epistle to the Romans*, 16–17. Gary Dorrien has confused the issue between them with this utterly misleading characterization: "Is the Spirit of Christ the sole subject of the scriptural witness, or are the Bible's other spirits also part of the defining subject matter of Scripture? Barth's early refusal to link the Spirit of Christ and the Bible's other sociohistorical spirits

Barth then laid down an "either-or" (his phrase) for the exegete: "The question is whether or not he is to place himself in a relation to his author of utter loyalty." The commentator must always assume that "when he fails to understand, the blame is his and not Paul's."³⁶

Barth's reply to Bultmann is puzzling: while some of his statements appear to retract what he had earlier said about the necessity of *Sachkritik*, other statements of his appear to reaffirm what he once said.³⁷ To be sure, Bultmann readily agreed that the exegete should always strive for loyalty to the author without, however, granting that such loyalty ought to preclude criticism when the author goes astray: "faithfulness to the author may be demonstrated by sometimes having to correct the material into which we are led by him."³⁸ But he could not agree at all with Barth's assertion that the spirit of Christ nowhere speaks plainly in the text.

reappeared in all of his later debates with Bultmann. In various ways he persistently denied that the Bible's other spirits deserved to be linked by a compromising 'and' to the Spirit of Christ." *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology: Theology without Weapons* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2000), 104. For Bultmann, the "spirit of Christ" is the sole subject matter of the scriptural witness, which is precisely why Paul must be criticized when he, not Bultmann, is led astray by other spirits!

36. Barth, "Preface to the Third Edition," *Epistle to the Romans*, 17.

37. On the one hand, Barth insisted: "The problem is whether the whole must not be understood in relation to the true subject-matter which is—The Spirit of Christ.... Even so, the extent to which the commentator will be able to disclose the Spirit of Christ in his reading of Paul will not be everywhere the same. But he will know that the responsibility rests on his shoulders; and he will not let himself be bewildered by the voices of those other spirits, which so often render inaudible the dominant tones of the Spirit of Christ....Nor will he rest content until paradoxically he has seen the whole in the fragments... so that all the other spirits are seen in some way or other to serve the Spirit of Christ." "Preface to the Third Edition," *Epistle to the Romans*, 17. On the other hand, he conceded: "Is there any way of penetrating the heart of a document—of any document!—except on the assumption that its spirit will speak to our spirit through the actual written words? *This does not exclude a criticism of the letter by the spirit, which is, indeed, unavoidable.* No human word, no word of Paul, is absolute truth. In this I agree with Bultmann." "Preface to the Third Edition," *Epistle to the Romans*, 18–19 (italics added). Although it certainly seems to me that Barth is speaking out of both sides of his mouth here, Hartwig Thyen rushes to his defense against Bultmann without, however, shedding any light on the issue that might clear up these apparently contradictory statements. "Rudolf Bultmann, Karl Barth, und das Problem der 'Sachkritik,'" in *Rudolf Bultmanns Werk und Wirkung*, ed. Bernd Jaspert (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1984), 44–52. Hans Weder is similarly puzzled by Barth: "It remains unclear how this critique of the letter by the spirit [acknowledged as legitimate by Barth] can occur except as a critique of the Pauline word by the spirit of Christ and wherein exactly this critique would differentiate itself from the *Sachkritik* of Bultmann." "Die Externität der Mitte: Überlegungen zum hermeneutischen Problem des Kriteriums der Sachkritik am Neuen Testament," in *Jesus Christus als die Mitte der Schrift: Studien zur Hermeneutik des Evangeliums*, ed. Christof Landmesser, Hans-Joachim Eckstein, and Hermann Lichtenberger (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 306.

38. Letter of Bultmann to Barth (Dec. 31, 1922), in *Karl Barth—Rudolf Bultmann: Letters 1922/1966*, ed. Bernd Jaspert, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 4.

[Y]our statement that it is only other spirits that come to *words* in Romans seems to me to lead to the ridiculous conclusion that one can either expound every word that is spoken or written as testimony to the πνεῦμα Χρ. [spirit of Christ] or one can expound none at all.³⁹

Yet Barth maintained that he was “completely unable to understand Bultmann’s demand”: “He asks me to think and write WITH Paul...and then suddenly...to turn around and write ‘critically’ ABOUT him and against him.”⁴⁰ But there is no contradiction here, as Barth implied, for what could it possibly mean to think *with* Paul if one may never be allowed to think *against* Paul?⁴¹

The same issue between them resurfaced in Bultmann’s review of another early book by Barth, *The Resurrection of the Dead* (1924, first edition), which is a commentary on 1 Corinthians. While Bultmann once again praised Barth for his profound grasp of Paul’s fundamental purpose in the letter (“he has rightly seen the decisive point”) as well as for bringing discussion of it “out of the area of explanation in terms of its historical context into the sphere of material discussion of its content,” Bultmann judged that “the presentation of his exegetical insights lacks a certain clarity and intellectual precision.”⁴² Since Barth’s commentary, which aims at a theological exegesis of Paul’s letter, does not oppose “historical-philological interpretation,” Bultmann urged “a more exact exegesis which starts out from the determination of the meaning of the text in its own period” in order “to attain a still sharper conceptual comprehension of the result.”⁴³ The result will be “material criticism,” but one “which stems from the text itself” instead of an arbitrary exegesis that explains away difficult passages in the text.⁴⁴ Bultmann was cognizant of the risk involved in *Sachkritik* and he therefore insisted that “the exegesis must be developed on the basis of the most exact knowledge of the contemporary background and by means of careful and penetrating

analysis of the content.”⁴⁵

Yet Barth, though brilliantly elucidating the theological content of what Paul *means*, at times refused to acknowledge what Paul actually *says* and how what he says contradicts what he really means. For example, Barth claimed that when Paul speaks of “the resurrection of the dead,” this is really a paraphrase for “God.” Bultmann agreed. But Barth then denied that Paul also tried “to make the resurrection of Christ credible as an objective historical fact,” which for Bultmann is an instance where “Paul is betrayed by his apologetic into contradicting himself.”⁴⁶ Consequently, while endorsing many of Barth’s insights into what Paul means, Bultmann distanced himself from Barth’s unwillingness to criticize Paul’s statements based on his subject matter:

I regret Barth’s failure to recognize that this meaning can be ascribed to Paul only on the basis of a critical study of the content. Barth himself involuntarily employs such criticism in his own ingenious paraphrases. But I do not think this kind of criticism, this analysis, is so easy to practice. However much I admire Barth’s sure grasp of the central ideas of the text, I cannot proceed by his method.... In my judgment there is need of much more rigorous exegetical work and of closer analysis of the text if assured results are to be attained.⁴⁷

It is nonetheless clear from these appreciative, albeit critical, reviews that Bultmann sought to put historical-critical scholarship in service of the kind of theological exegesis advocated by Barth: “Barth has shown a new direction. The work is not finished, but we stand at a new beginning.”⁴⁸

What should one make of this early disagreement between these two representatives of dialectical theology? Although they were united in their aim to recover a theological exegesis of the Bible that moved from interpretation of the biblical text to interpretation of the text’s subject matter (*Sache*), their united front proved to be fragile as soon as Bultmann tried to hold Barth accountable to its own explicit statement that exegesis of the text’s subject matter (*Sachexegese*) demands criticism of the text based on its subject matter (*Sachkritik*). Since Barth refused to follow Bultmann in thinking *against* Paul as a necessary requirement of thinking *with* Paul, even though it was Barth himself who first annunciated the demand for such willingness, Bultmann in perplexity was led to remark: “In this question I cannot at root see any difference between your exegetical approach and mine, great though the difference may be in exegetical practice.”⁴⁹ In this connection two observations are pertinent.

First, in spite of their agreement that a recovery of theological

39. *Ibid.*, 5.

40. Barth, “Preface to the Third Edition,” *Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, 18.

41. Barth’s objection to “Bultmann’s demand” implies that to think with Paul means to subject oneself to him. But that is not real thinking. No one who engages in genuine dialogue exhibits this kind of “utter loyalty” to an interlocutor. The only loyalty that can ever be required is loyalty to the common subject matter under discussion. Indeed, in every mutual examination of a serious topic, argument—in the sense of questioning and even criticism of the interlocutor’s ideas—is bound to occur, yet such argument hardly constitutes a betrayal of one’s dialogue partner. In this regard, see the thoughtful essay by David Tracy, “Argument, Dialogue, and the Soul in Plato,” in *Witness and Existence: Essays in Honor of Schubert M. Ogden* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1989), 91–105. Tracy insists: “Arguments are a necessary moment in any properly dialectical conversation” (96). “Dialectical” here refers to conversation in search of the truth, as in Plato’s dialogues. On the somewhat different meaning of “dialectic” in “dialectical theology,” see Bultmann, “The Question of ‘Dialectic’ Theology: A Discussion with Erik Peterson,” in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, 257–274.

42. Bultmann, “Karl Barth, The Resurrection of the Dead,” in *Faith and Understanding* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 69.

43. *Ibid.*, 72.

44. *Ibid.*

45. *Ibid.*, 93.

46. *Ibid.*, 83.

47. *Ibid.*, 86.

48. *Ibid.*, 93.

49. Letter of Bultmann to Barth (Dec. 31, 1922), in *Letters*, 4. Jüngel comments: “Barth’s exchange with Bultmann was critical, but it also embraced a far-reaching consensus” (*Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, 80).

exegesis oriented toward Scripture's subject matter required moving beyond historicism without relapsing into biblicism, Barth and Bultmann took two very different positions. Bultmann never wavered in his commitment to the historical-critical enterprise for interpreting the New Testament in its ancient religious and philosophical context. While he held that a *merely* historical approach was insufficient, he never denied that it was absolutely necessary. For him, a responsible theological exegesis, such as Barth proposed, could only be undertaken based on results obtained by historical criticism. Even after dialectical theology movement disbanded, Bultmann not only continued to think along the lines he had received from the early Barth but he also went on to elaborate a hermeneutically sophisticated program for theological exegesis, making full use of historical-critical scholarship. In retrospect, Bultmann gave this explanation of his relation to both dialectical theology and the liberal legacy of historical criticism:

It seemed to me that in this new theological movement it was rightly recognized, as over against the "liberal" theology out of which I had come, that the Christian faith is not a phenomenon of the history of religion... and that therefore theology does not need to look upon it as a phenomenon of religious or cultural history. It seemed to me that, as over against such a view, the new theology had correctly seen that Christian faith is the answer to the word of the transcendent God that encounters man and that theology has to deal with this word and the man who has been encountered by it. This judgment, however, has never led me to a simple condemnation of "liberal" theology; on the contrary, I have endeavored throughout my entire life to carry further the tradition of historical-critical research as it was practiced by the "liberal" theology and to make our more recent theological knowledge fruitful for it.⁵⁰

With Barth, however, things were different. His enthusiasm for historical criticism was never more than lukewarm.⁵¹ Already

50. Bultmann, "Autobiographical Reflections," in *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*, trans. Schubert M. Ogden (New York: Meridian Books, 1960), 287–288. One cannot overstate the importance of the early Barth for Bultmann's theological development. In 1956 he listed Barth's *Romans* as one of the six most important books that had "decisive significance" for his work as a theologian and exegete. Konrad Hammann, *Rudolf Bultmann: A Biography*, trans. Philip E. Devenish (Salem, Ore.: Polebridge Press, 2013), 466. Indeed, he always maintained that he continued faithfully down the path pioneered by the early Barth long after Barth himself had turned away from it: "The decisive impulse for me was what you once described in the preface to the second edition of your *Romans*.... I do not intend to reverse the revolution achieved by you some thirty years ago but to solidify the new path methodologically." Letter of Bultmann to Barth (November 11–15, 1952), in *Letters*, 101.

51. Walter Lindemann comments: "The doubtless sincerely meant explanations of Barth that 'theological' exegesis should in no wise displace historical-critical method stand in contradiction to the extensive abdication of precisely this method in his own exegetical works. It was understandable, therefore, when representatives of the

After his break with his erstwhile colleagues in the movement of dialectical theology, including Bultmann, Barth distanced himself from his earlier position expressed in his *Romans* and embarked upon writing *Church Dogmatics* in which he formulated his mature theology.

in 1926, before the dissolution of their alliance, Barth's feelings about Bultmann had begun to sour. That year Bultmann's book appeared, in which he presented his reconstruction of the message of Jesus based on his form-critical identification of the earliest layer of the synoptic tradition.⁵² Barth did not hide his dismay:

I absolutely cannot comprehend how or by what right one comes to carving precisely this Jesus out of the New Testament and setting Him up. I had expected that the radical criticism of Bultmann... would bring it about that New Testament science would henceforth look away from *all* other pictures of Jesus than the completely concrete one of the New Testament writers.... My disappointment in Bultmann's book consisted in the fact that I saw it proceeding in the old way, with an uncontrolled mixture of the usual historical criticism and the new material criticism [*Sachkritik*]; in the way according to which the New Testament is read as historical source rather than as witness.⁵³

After his break with his erstwhile colleagues in the movement of dialectical theology, including Bultmann, Barth distanced himself from his earlier position expressed in his *Romans* and embarked upon writing *Church Dogmatics* in which he formulated his mature theology. In his later work, he never ceased to affirm the partial validity of historical-critical exegesis, even though he tended to

historical-critical method simply concluded that there was a disparagement, if not utter rejection of historical criticism in Barth. To be sure, the negative results of radical criticism, such as was practiced by form criticism, suited Barth's purpose since thereby the historical ground was taken out from underneath the tacit dogmatic-religious categories of the liberal exegetes, but he appeared to have attributed hardly any positive function to historical criticism at all." *Karl Barth und die kritische Schriftauslegung* (Hamburg: Herbert Reich Evangelischer Verlag, 1973), 82.

52. *Jesus and the Word*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith and Erminie Huntress Lantero (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962).

53. Letter of Barth to Paul Althaus (May 30, 1928), cited by Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909–1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 394.

ignore it whenever it did not suit his theological purposes. Indeed, it is quite difficult to pin down with precision Barth's relation to historical criticism.⁵⁴ It is fair to say that he felt far more sympathy for biblicism than for historicism, as his repeated admissions of his affinity for the doctrine of inspiration bear out, despite his denial that the Bible is a verbally inerrant text. Curiously, in his statements *about* the Bible, Barth sounds rather like Bultmann; but in his actual use *of* the Bible, he is very different from him.⁵⁵

Second, the confessional difference between them increasingly came to the fore. In a letter to Barth from 1927, Bultmann wondered if the old Lutheran-Calvinist antithesis was a factor at play in their difficulties with reaching mutual understanding. He expressed the hope that they could avoid a renewal of that opposition, since the common ground uniting them was so much more important.⁵⁶ In his reply, Barth acknowledged the difference that the confessional divide was bound to make: "In some way, the old controversies between the Lutherans and the Reformed, which were never settled, do cause us difficulties on both sides and will perhaps come to a head in a great explosion..."⁵⁷ In his detailed study of Barth's theological development, Bruce McCormack places great weight upon this confessional antithesis as a decisive factor contributing to Barth's eventual break with Bultmann.

Seen in general terms, Barth's concern with... Bultmann was very much bound up with his growing realization that his own Reformed starting-point had to bring him into conflict with Lutheranism. This was not a petty struggle over institutional identity; the issues were substantive. At first, both sides would have liked to believe that what united them was of greater importance than confessional differences. But eventually it became clear that these differences did exist and that they were having a considerable impact on how major issues were construed.⁵⁸

54. Mary Kathleen Cunningham summarizes the results of her study of Barth's exegetical practice: "In spite of his theoretical claim that he does not intend to annul the results of biblical scholarship in the last centuries, in practice Barth's treatment of the Bible... has the effect of severely limiting the value of this kind of scholarship for his exegesis of Scripture.... Comparing Barth's exegesis with that of representative biblical scholars has thus revealed Barth's tendency to deal with critical scholarship in an ad hoc fashion and to find the results of this kind of interpretation helpful only insofar as they serve to illumine and do not challenge his fundamental Christological focus." *What is Theological Exegesis? Interpretation and Use of Scripture in Barth's Doctrine of Election* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1995), 75.

55. Barth wrote: "Scripture is holy and the Word of God because by the Holy Spirit it became and will become to the Church a witness to divine revelation." *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. T. Thompson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 1.2: 457. Bultmann said: "Theology, therefore, is always exegesis inasmuch as it has access to revelation only through the witness of Scripture and seeks to grasp by exegesis what Scripture, understood as witness, says." "The Question of 'Dialectic' Theology," 273.

56. Letter of Bultmann to Barth (April 21, 1927), in *Letters*, 32.

57. Letter of Barth to Bultmann (April 28, 1927), in *Letters*, 32.

58. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical*

Although the term *Sachkritik* was not employed this time around, the same issue was at stake as before. Bultmann maintained that demythologizing, while occasioned by the modern scientific worldview, is demanded by the New Testament itself.

McCormack notes that already in Barth's 1922 lectures on Calvin one can observe the emergence of "a carefully circumscribed affirmation of the Reformed Scripture-principle."

Barth's critical attitude toward biblical history had been considerably supplemented by a positive appreciation of the authority of the biblical text. This was indeed a new element in his thinking.⁵⁹

A year later (1923) Barth identified "the scriptural principle" as the hallmark of a Reformed theology: "the whole Scriptures, and not a part of them."⁶⁰ This ringing affirmation of the entire biblical canon certainly appears to be in keeping with Barth's reluctance to engage in *Sachkritik*.

The "great explosion" prophesied by Barth finally occurred decades later in the debate over Bultmann's demythologizing program. In the meantime, Bultmann had found his second great inspiration—after Barth's *Romans*—in the existentialist philosophy of his colleague Martin Heidegger.⁶¹ Although the term *Sachkritik* was not employed this time around, the same issue was at stake as before. Bultmann maintained that demythologizing, while occasioned by the modern scientific worldview, is demanded by the New Testament itself. Since the question to which the New Testament addresses itself is the strictly existential question about how human beings are to understand themselves authentically, existentialism provides an adequate conceptuality by which to translate the message of the New Testament in non-mythological

Theology, 392.

59. *Ibid.*, 305.

60. Barth, "The Doctrinal Task of the Reformed Churches," in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 240–241.

61. Bultmann reflected upon his encounter with Heidegger and the consequent rift with Barth: "existential philosophy, which I came to know through my discussion with Martin Heidegger, has become of decisive significance for me. I found in it the conceptuality in which it is possible to speak adequately of human existence and therefore also of the existence of the believer. However, in my efforts to make philosophy fruitful for theology, I have more and more come into opposition to Karl Barth. Nevertheless, I remain grateful to him for the decisive things I have learned from him." "Autobiographical Reflections," in *Existence and Faith*, 288.

terms. Indeed, Bultmann saw a precedent for this hermeneutical procedure in Paul and Luther:

Indeed, de-mythologizing is a task parallel to that performed by Paul and Luther in their doctrine of justification by faith alone without works of the law. More precisely, de-mythologizing is the radical application of the doctrine of justification by faith to the sphere of knowledge and thought. Like the doctrine of justification, de-mythologizing destroys every longing for security. There is no difference between security based on good works and security built on objectifying knowledge.⁶²

Again, Barth registered his protest against Bultmann's critical hermeneutical procedure in the name of loyalty to the text of the New Testament.⁶³ Yet Barth also knew that Bultmann's program for theology, however radical it may be, "is inconceivable apart from his Lutheran background." Hence, Barth readily conceded that "Bultmann is simply a Lutheran—*sui generis*, of course."⁶⁴ With this concession, Barth acknowledged Bultmann as a modern-day heir to Luther, even as Bultmann's example only served to confirm Barth in the long-standing reservations he, as a Reformed theologian, harbored about Lutheranism.⁶⁵ It is to his credit, when conservatives in the Lutheran Church in Germany wanted to put Bultmann on trial for heresy, Barth advised them against this course of action with these cautionary words: "those who throw stones at Bultmann should be careful lest they accidentally hit Luther."⁶⁶

62. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 84.

63. "I cannot say that I recognize in this translation [from ancient mythology into the modern terminology of existentialism] the basic pattern of the New Testament message." Barth, "Rudolf Bultmann—an Attempt to Understand Him," in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, vol. 2, ed. Hans-Werner Bartsch, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (London: S. P. C. K., 1962), 91.

64. Barth, "Rudolf Bultmann—an Attempt to Understand Him," 92.

65. Barth believed that much of the anthropological and subjectivist orientation of modern theology that he criticized could be traced back to Luther. He saw these same tendencies revived in Bultmann. Notice how Barth characterized the divergent ways the Lutherans and the Reformed articulated their shared conviction that "God and faith" belong together: Luther "asked the question...*how* the human is saved" whereas the Reformed asked "who saves the human." For Barth, this means that Luther is focused on the human subject of faith whereas the Reformed are focused on the divine object of faith. Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, trans. Darrell L. Guder and Judith J. Guder (Louisville and London: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2002), 81. This may be an accurate statement of a *difference in emphasis*, though surely *not in content*. The theologies of Luther and Bultmann, though methodologically (or formally) anthropological in their orientation, are not anthropocentric (or subjectivist) in a material or substantive sense because for both theologians *faith in God* is the answer to the human being's existential predicament. As Bultmann explained, "[S]ince revelation is the eternal event, judging or forgiving man, the object of theology is nothing other than the conceptual presentation of *man's existence as determined by God*..." "The Question of 'Dialectic' Theology," 273-74 (italics added).

66. Barth, "Rudolf Bultmann—An Attempt to Understand

Modern scholars distinguish between the "formal principle" and the "material principle" of the Reformation. The formal principle refers to the authority on which the Reformers based their theology. The material principle refers to the content of their theology.

The Gospel and the Canon of Scripture: Luther's *Sachkritik* and Calvin's dissent

Modern scholars distinguish between the "formal principle" and the "material principle" of the Reformation.⁶⁷ The formal principle refers to the authority on which the Reformers based their theology. The material principle refers to the content of their theology. If we asked them, "What is the authoritative source and norm of your theology?" they would have replied "Scripture alone" (*sola scriptura*). If we then asked them, "What do you believe Scripture teaches?" they would have replied "faith alone" (*sola fide*). In both cases, the little word "alone" (Latin: *sola*) was a denial of the Roman Catholic position. Their formal principle denied the authority of the Catholic tradition; instead of "Scripture and tradition," the Reformers insisted upon the sole authority of the Bible as the source and norm of Christian doctrine. Their material principle denied the soteriological doctrine of Catholic theology that justification presupposes sanctification (that is, perfection in love of God and neighbor); instead of "faith and works of love," the Reformers insisted upon the sole sufficiency of faith for our justification. Crucial here is that the word "faith" was redefined by the Reformers to signify "trust," whereas the Catholics typically defined it as "assent"; so also, they redefined "grace" to mean "mercy" or "forgiveness" whereas the Catholics defined it as a "supernatural power" or a "spiritual medicine." Accordingly, Catholic grace is communicated through the sacraments (the means of grace) while Protestant grace is communicated through preaching the gospel, which is the good news of the message of

Him," 90. Barth wrote to Bishop Theophil Wurm: "[N]o controversy should be initiated between the church and the theology of Rudolf Bultmann.... I even conjecture that the existence of a 'heretic' like Bultmann, who is so superior to most of his accusers in knowledge, seriousness, and depth, might be indirectly salutary to the church..." Letter of May 29, 1947, in Barth-Bultmann, *Letters*, 145.

67. The distinction goes back to Albrecht Ritschl, *Über die beiden Prinzipien des Protestantismus in Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Freiburg/Leipzig, 1893), 1: 234-247.

God's forgiveness.⁶⁸ Preaching thus evokes and sustains our trust that God has forgiven us for Christ's sake. This trust or confidence (faith) in the truth of God's promise of forgiveness (the gospel) suffices as our sole proper response to God's mercy (grace). This in sum is the heart of Luther's reformation, which Calvin fully affirmed as Luther's disciple.

In classical Protestant theology, the term "Word of God" has two distinct, albeit related meanings. It refers both to the event of preaching the gospel and the Scripture on which all authentic preaching of the gospel is based. In the vocabulary of the Reformers, "gospel" does not designate primarily the narratives of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; rather, it means the message of salvation and its proclamation in speech. This is how the apostle Paul used the Greek word *euangelion*: it is both the act and the content of preaching. Accordingly, the Reformers looked upon the act of preaching itself as the Word of God, provided that the content of the sermon is genuinely evangelical.⁶⁹ Before the texts we know as the New Testament were written, the gospel was proclaimed orally.⁷⁰ Still, the Reformers also spoke of the written words of the Bible as the Word of God. This double-reference of the term "Word of God" is the source of the systematic ambiguity that necessitated the modern scholarly distinction between the material and the formal principles of the Reformation. The question is: What is the relationship between the Word of God as gospel and the Word of God as Scripture?

The Reformers inherited from their medieval forebears the belief that the Scriptures are divinely inspired. In the articulation of their distinctive formal principle of Scripture alone, they were not affirming anything new about the Bible. Rather, they were denying divine inspiration to the post-biblical tradition of the church ("popes and councils can err").⁷¹ In pitting Scripture against

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tradition, they were attempting to liberate the Bible from the tradition, so that the message of Scripture (gospel) could be heard on its own terms apart from the distorting filter of subsequent tradition: *scriptura sui ipsius interpres*. Thereby they insisted that the church validate its doctrine according to the biblical norm. But there was more to this juxtaposition of Scripture and tradition, since the Reformers actually redefined what they meant by Scripture. First, they rejected the Latin Vulgate translation that was authoritative for Catholicism; in its place they availed themselves of the humanistic study of ancient languages, in order to read the Bible in Hebrew and Greek.⁷² This daring move uncovered discrepancies between the original text of Scripture and the Vulgate upon which

but that he denies the authority of church and pope." B. A. Gerrish, "The Word of God and the Words of Scripture: Luther and Calvin on Biblical Authority," in *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982), 54.

72. The Renaissance gave rise to humanism, the study of ancient languages and history, which, when applied to the Bible, was perceived as a severe threat by scholastic theologians: "When humanists began to apply their skills to sacred texts, theologians closed ranks to defend their territory from encroachment." The Reformers shared with the humanists two objectives: "the quest for an unadulterated biblical text and a historically correct interpretation." Erika Rummel, *The Humanist-Scholastic Debate in the Renaissance and Reformation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1998), 6, 10. Rummel cites the slogan coined by Bernd Moeller: "Ohne Humanismus keine Reformation" ("Without humanism, no Reformation"). *Ibid.*, 10. In 1506 Reuchlin published his *Rudiments of the Hebrew Language* and in 1516, a year before Luther posted the Ninety-Five Theses, Erasmus published his Greek text of the New Testament. Heiko A. Oberman explains their significance: "[C]onservative theologians ... stubbornly adhered to the Vulgate...[and] succeeded in having the great German Hebraist Johannes Ruchlin condemned in Rome.... Now they were endeavoring to silence Erasmus." "Luther...was unquestionably one of the theologians who could appreciate what humanist scholarship had achieved: without knowledge of ancient languages there could be no reliable exegesis of the Scriptures! When Erasmus published his edition of the Greek New Testament in 1516, Wittenberg hailed the word as revolutionary.... In contrast to Erasmus, Luther even numbered among the first of the humanists of his time (and among the few) who used Reuchlin's works to study Hebrew. Thus, Luther recognized that mastery of ancient languages was a necessary tool in accomplishing a clear textual interpretation of the Bible." *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 214.

68. One could say, though the Reformers never do so, that the sermon is the real Protestant sacrament, since preaching is the "means of grace" by which God's mercy is mediated to sinners.

69. Gerhard Ebeling comments on Luther's theology: "The word of Scripture...is the Word of God when it is a word proclaimed in the present, a *viva vox evangelii*—naturally in the form of interpretation based on the word of Scripture, and yet in such a way that this word confronts us not as something written but as an oral word, that is, one uttered here and now....In this way the point is driven home that the proclaiming of the Word of God belongs to the very essence of this Word, and therefore that interpretation also belongs to this essence (because of the Word's necessary foundation in the testimony of the Scripture)." *The Problem of Historicity in the Church and its Proclamation*, trans. Grover Foley (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 14–15.

70. Jaroslav Pelikan explains: "The designation of the word of God in the gospel as an 'oral word'...was a persistent theme. When he referred to the word of God in the gospel, Luther explained, he was 'not speaking about the written gospel, but about the vocal one.'... Christ himself had not written but preached, and had not commanded his disciples to write but to preach, so that 'the gospel might be brought out of dead Scripture and pens into the living voice and mouth.'" *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine. Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300–1700)* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 4:180.

71. "The distinctive element in this affirmation is really what it denies rather than what it affirms. What marks Luther off from [his theological opponents] is not that he asserts the authority of the Bible

the Catholic Church based its doctrinal claims. Accordingly, the Reformers posited deep discontinuity between Scripture and the medieval tradition.⁷³ This critical posture toward the post-biblical tradition, however, created a problem for the Reformers, who were consequently at a loss as to how they could justify their acceptance of the authority of the New Testament canon given their denial of the inspiration of the church's tradition that had canonized these writings.⁷⁴ Second, the Reformers demoted the Apocrypha from its canonical status by embracing the Masoretic text and canon of the Jews as their own Old Testament. As a result, the Bible recognized by Protestants was much smaller in scope than the Bible acknowledged by their Roman Catholic opponents. Finally, the Reformers rejected every allegorical or spiritualizing hermeneutic in favor of an exegesis based upon the literal-historical sense of the text. Clearly the Protestant appeal to the Bible alone was radical indeed!

Since the Reformers set out to test critically the post-biblical tradition according to the norm of Scripture, they initially presumed to have the entire Bible on their side in the polemic against Catholicism and its doctrine of justification. After all, for the Reformers to implement their program consistently, there had to be complete overlap between the formal principle of Scripture alone and the material principle of faith alone. Yet, notwithstanding their far-reaching redefinition of what they meant by Scripture, there was one text in the New Testament that appeared to support the Catholic position on justification against Luther and the Protestants. Notoriously, the Epistle of James seems to contradict Paul—or at least Luther's interpretation of Paul. James states categorically: "a person is justified by works and not by faith alone" (James 2:24). Compare this with Paul who declares just as categorically: "a person is justified by faith apart from works" (Rom 3:28). Luther offered to give away his doctor's cap to anyone who could bring James into harmony with Paul. It is a testimony to Luther's honesty that he admitted he could not reconcile these two passages of Scripture with one another. Consequently, Luther's verdict on James was bold and daring: James "does violence to Scripture, and so contradicts Paul and all Scripture....I therefore refuse him a place among the writers of the true canon of my Bible."⁷⁵ Besides drastically reducing the extent of the Old Testament canon, Luther thus also exercised criticism of the received New Testament canon by denying the apostolic authorship of James.⁷⁶ Here, however, he

73. Euan Cameron comments on the Reformers' "cavalier defiance" of the church's postbiblical tradition: "the older generation had interpreted Scripture through a tradition, rather than contradicting tradition and the church in the name of Scripture." *The European Reformation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 187.

74. "Nowhere did the Reformation view of authority seem to its critics to be more vulnerable than on the canon of Scripture." Pelikan, 4:266.

75. Martin Luther, "Preface to James and Jude," in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1961), 36.

76. In addition to his criticism of James, Luther raised critical questions about Hebrews, Jude, and Revelation. "One of the most striking features of Luther's German New Testament is the remarkable

Since the Reformers set out to test critically the post-biblical tradition according to the norm of Scripture, they initially presumed to have the entire Bible on their side in the polemic against Catholicism and its doctrine of justification.

did not mean exactly what the tradition had meant by "apostolic," namely, that an author of a New Testament text was either one of Jesus' original apostles (for example, Matthew or Peter) or a disciple of an apostle (for example, Mark, traditionally believed to be Peter's disciple). Luther redefined the concept of "apostolicity." Instead of mere historical proximity to Jesus, it now meant correct preaching of the gospel:

The true touchstone for testing every book [in the Bible] is to discover whether it emphasizes the prominence of Christ or not.... What does not teach Christ is not apostolic, not even if taught by Peter or Paul. On the other hand, what does preach Christ is apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate, or Herod does it.⁷⁷

Luther found in Scripture, specifically in Paul's letters, the theological norm by which to measure Scripture or, as it is often described, "a canon within the canon," for criticizing Scripture when it fails to "teach Christ."⁷⁸ In so doing he pioneered *Sachkritik*.

freedom with which he judges the relative worth of the various books. In the list of New Testament books which immediately follows his prefatory 'Instruction' four of the books appear unnumbered, and are set apart from the others by a blank space: Hebrews, James, Jude, and the Apocalypse. This is precisely the way in which Luther marks off the canonical from the apocryphal books of the Old Testament. The individual prefaces to the four downgraded books afford an explanation and justification for this severe judgment, perhaps the best illustration of Luther's 'critical methods'.... To some extent it can be shown that his critical judgments were suggested to him by the Humanists: in the Annotations to his Greek New Testament Erasmus expressed opinions very similar to Luther's on these four problem-books. And yet even where Luther is apparently leaning most heavily on Erasmus we can detect, at the same time, his genuine independence. In the last analysis, Luther's downgrading certain books of the New Testament must be taken as evidence of his theological convictions, not merely of his confidence in scholarly criticism." B.A. Gerrish, *Grace and Reason: A Study in the Theology of Luther* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979), 146–147.

77. Luther, *Selections*, 35–36. When Luther says, "teach Christ" or "preach Christ," he means "justification by faith alone." For Luther, the real meaning of Christology can only be explicated in soteriological terms.

78. The word "canon" means "norm." The word also designates the list of books found in the Bible which are called "canonical."

Although Calvin saw himself as a loyal follower of Luther, whom he called “the pathfinder” in recognition of his role in initiating the Reformation, Calvin was not uncritical of Luther and took issue with his exegesis of James.⁷⁹ Calvin believed that James does not actually disagree with Paul but instead combats a distorted version of Paul’s theology. There is certainly something to be said on behalf of this view.⁸⁰ Clearly, James takes aim at people who boast of having faith yet may appeal to their faith as a pretext for doing nothing to help their neighbors. As Calvin pointed out, the notion of faith criticized by James is not the robust notion of faith found in Paul’s letters. Luther too noted that James talks only of “a commonplace faith in God.”⁸¹ The Reformers called it “demons’ faith,” that is, a mere intellectual assent to the proposition that God exists: “You believe that God is one; good for you! Even the demons believe that—and shudder” (James 2:19). For Calvin as for Luther, faith in the genuinely Pauline sense is inherently active in doing good works for the neighbor’s benefit (“faith working through love,” Gal 5:6). Indeed, the situation described by James (“faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead,” James 2:17) was inconceivable to them given Paul’s notion of faith. Yet precisely for that reason, Calvin did not agree with Luther that James stands in contradiction to Paul, since James is fighting against a counterfeit of Paul’s actual position and thereby vindicates Paul: “Obviously, if this faith contains nothing but a belief that there is a God, it is not strange if it does not justify.”⁸² Calvin thus claimed to have succeeded where Luther confessed failure, namely, in reconciling James with Paul. Still, Luther would not have been satisfied; although he admitted “it would be possible to ‘save’ the epistle by a gloss,” he thought any such gloss would purchase the harmonization of James and Paul at the price of the plain sense of the text of James, since, in direct opposition to Paul, he declares that justification is by works and not by faith alone.⁸³ Calvin tacitly agreed when he conceded that, in order to reconcile them, one has to posit that James used the word “justify” differently than Paul: “If you would make James agree with the rest of Scripture... you must understand the word ‘justify’ in another sense than Paul takes it.”⁸⁴ But here Calvin’s exegesis is strained in the extreme.

The exegetical debate since the sixteenth century has moved

Hence, a canon within the canon refers to the theological norm by which the biblical books are judged to be adequate or not in their role as witnesses to the gospel (the real norm). This implies that the Bible itself is a “normed norm” (*norma normata*), whereas the gospel is the un-normed norm (*norma normans sed non normata*).

79. Gerrish, “The Pathfinder: Calvin’s Image of Martin Luther,” in *The Old Protestantism and the New*, 39.

80. For a good overview of modern biblical scholarship, see the excursus on “Faith and Works in Paul and James” in Martin Dibelius, *James: A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, trans. Michael A. Williams (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 174–180.

81. Luther, *Selections*, 35.

82. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:815 (3.17.11).

83. Luther, *Selections*, 35.

84. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:816 (3.17.12).

The first Protestant not only subjected the post-biblical tradition of the church to criticism in the name of the Bible but also subjected the Bible to criticism in the name of the gospel! Luther’s boldness in this regard was unprecedented for a medieval theologian.

back and forth between the poles represented by Luther and Calvin. In the contrasting answers of Luther and Calvin on the question of James we see illustrated the basic divergence between two Protestant attitudes toward the Bible. For Calvin, it was unthinkable that there could ever be a contradiction within the Bible since all of Scripture is inspired by God. Hence, the exegete must strive to find an explanation (a gloss) of any text that initially gives the impression of being out of harmony with the rest of the Bible, in order to demonstrate that it really is not. This does not mean that Calvin failed to distinguish between Scripture as the Word of God and the gospel as the Word of God. He did distinguish between them. However, whereas we are to rely for assurance of salvation solely upon the gospel since this is God’s promise of forgiveness, Calvin insisted that we are also to obey every word of God in the Bible, whatever its content may be:

Faith is certain that God is true in all things whether he command or forbid, whether he promise or threaten; and it also obediently receives his commandments, observes his prohibitions, heeds his threats. Nevertheless, faith properly begins with the promise, rests in it, and ends in it.⁸⁵

While Calvin distinguished between all of God’s words in Scripture and God’s promise in the gospel, he could never admit a conflict between them. By contrast, Luther did not hesitate to criticize Scripture when he believed that a choice had to be made between it and the gospel.⁸⁶

The amazing freedom with which Luther criticized the canon of Scripture would no doubt come as a surprise to most Protestants today, for whom any criticism of the Bible is unthinkable and blasphemous, just as some of Luther’s ardent supporters in the sixteenth century, such as Calvin, also had difficulty with it. But

85. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:575 (3.2.29).

86. “For other Protestants the Bible was central, but for Luther it was subordinate to the truth of the basic doctrine he found in it.” Donald J. Wilcox, *In Search of God and Self: Renaissance and Reformation Thought* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975; repr., Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland, 1987), 303.

the first Protestant not only subjected the post-biblical tradition of the church to criticism in the name of the Bible but also subjected the Bible to criticism in the name of the gospel! Luther's boldness in this regard was unprecedented for a medieval theologian.

This discussion also raises the question what exactly Luther meant by "Scripture alone." Roland Bainton in "The Bible in the Reformation" observed:

But if the Scripture were the authority, what then was the Scripture? That question might seem long ago to have been settled because the canon, both of the Old Testament and of the New, had been fixed since the days of the early Church. But if, as the reformers said, the Gospel was prior to the canon and only those books should be received which proclaimed the Gospel, might not the canon be re-examined?... Luther behaved as if he were minded to open a controversy on the canon not only of the Old Testament but also of the New.⁸⁷

Jaroslav Pelikan correctly stated that "[t]he theology of Martin Luther was a theology of the word of God." Yet Pelikan posed the question: "Was this word of God identical with the Bible?"

He could deal with various books of both the Old and New Testament, above all the Epistle of James, in a fashion that was difficult to harmonize with a high doctrine of biblical inspiration and inerrancy. Above all, Luther could sometimes dwell upon the centrality and authority of the gospel with an almost obsessive intensity, testing liturgical practice, ethical precept, and even theological dogma by this criterion rather than by the norm of conforming to the literal meaning of the biblical text.⁸⁸

Heinrich Bornkamm summarized Luther's view well:

The Bible is therefore not in and of itself Holy Scripture.... Unquestionably there is much in the Bible that is not determined by Christ.... [W]hat the Holy Scripture is becomes apparent only from the vantage point of the gospel.⁸⁹

Finally, Heiko Oberman wrote about Luther's approach toward Scripture:

The exclusive authority of the Holy Scriptures was not part of his Reformation discovery—a fact that gave rise to tensions in the sixteenth century and has caused misunderstanding to the present day.... His quest did not concern the authority of the Bible, which was self-evident

to him; he wanted to know how this authority could be properly expressed, how the Word of God could be ascertained among the wealth of scriptural testimony.⁹⁰

These comments from four impressive scholars—and other scholars could also have been cited—suffice to make the point that Luther was no biblicist: "The Bible for him was not strictly identical with the Word of God."⁹¹ The Bible was important only to the extent that it sets forth Christ: the gospel of justification by faith alone. Indeed, Scripture can and should be criticized to the extent that it does not do this. In Luther's view, therefore, the formal principle of Scripture alone is clearly subordinated to the material principle of faith alone.

Things were quite different in the Reformed camp. There the designation "reformed" gave expression not only to the shared Protestant self-consciousness of opposition to Roman Catholicism (that is, reformed according to the Word of God, unlike Rome which did not submit itself to God's Word), but also to the sense of being distinct from the Lutherans (that is, *more* reformed according to the Word of God than they are!). In their case, however, "the Word of God" meant the entire canon of Scripture: "Reformed teaching, therefore, put at the head of its agenda (and at the head of many of its doctrinal statements) the task of carrying 'reform in accordance with the word of God' to its necessary consequences, with a consistency and a rigor that went considerably beyond Luther."⁹² This is also how Barth characterized the two main Protestant confessions:

Scripture did not play quite the same part in Reformed Protestantism as in Lutheran. Its dignity here was one of principle as it never was in Lutheranism, no matter how highly the latter regarded it. Introducing reformation now meant establishing the Word of God in the Bible as the norm of faith and life.⁹³

Speaking of Zwingli and Calvin, Barth commented:

It is really a *formal* principle that is grasped here.... If only the Bible is heard again, then the necessary consequences will follow... [This] is the *new thing* that Zwingli and Calvin learned neither from *Erasmus* nor *Luther*.... They were not so bound to the one particular theme that Luther had discovered in the Bible. To be sure, they *also* put it at the heart of their proclamation. But one will always find that it was developed in Luther more profoundly and more powerfully. Thus, they were

90. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, 223.

91. Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon, 1950), 331.

92. Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma*, 183. "Unlike other Reformation confessions, the [Lutheran] Augsburg Confession did not open with a statement of the authority and inspiration of Scripture, nor with a list of the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments." *Ibid.*, 182.

93. Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 386.

87. Roland Bainton, "The Bible in the Reformation," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible: The West from the Reformation to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1963), 3:6.

88. Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma*, 183, 181.

89. Heinrich Bornkamm, *The Heart of Reformation Faith: The Fundamental Axioms of Evangelical Belief*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row, 1965), 40–41.

freer to let the Bible speak in its fullness, the entire Bible, freer to avoid reducing the Word of God to the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins. They let the Bible simply *speak* for itself as the form that best handles the question of its content *itself*.⁹⁴

Barth noted that the Lutheran church has been called “the church of the material principle, the doctrine of justification,” whereas the Reformed church, by contrast, has been called “the church of the formal principle of the Reformation, the principle of Scripture.”⁹⁵

Barth further admitted that among the Reformed “lesser prominence [was] given to the content [of Scripture], which was the starting point for Luther” since the Reformed “began by establishing biblical authority.”⁹⁶ Not surprisingly, Reformed theologians could not bring themselves to endorse Luther’s *Sachkritik*. Since Luther not only disparaged James as “an epistle of straw” but also faulted the Book of Revelation for its obscurity (“a revelation...should be revealing”⁹⁷), one sixteenth century Reformed statement took him to task for presuming to criticize God’s Word in Scripture:

In all of the books of the New Testament there is no hard knot to confuse us, nor do we hold that there might be some *useless straw* in them or that they mix up *one thing in another in a disorderly way*. And if the *human spirit cannot make its sense of the Revelation* or other books, then we pay no regard to its problem. For we know well that we humans should be guided by the Scripture, not the Scripture by us.⁹⁸

This Reformed criticism of Luther, cited by Barth with apparent approval, clearly expresses a very different attitude toward the Bible than that held by the German Reformer. Barth further elaborated the significance of this major difference between the Lutheran and the Reformed confessions to make it unambiguously clear what is at stake here for Protestantism:

It becomes understandable in this context why a number of Reformed confessional documents take such an unusual interest in the concept of the biblical *canon*. This was an interest that Lutheranism could not have because...it did not place such emphasis upon the isolated normativity of the Bible. For the Reformed, it is precisely the Bible’s isolated normativity that is important...⁹⁹

With that final sentence Barth hit the nail on the head! He then threw down the gauntlet:

[T]he Scripture principle is the only article of faith that has persisted up to today in the doctrinal statements of all Reformed churches... Whether we will then... read the Bible ‘as if the living words of God were heard’—that is the fateful question whose answer will decide the future of Reformed (and not only Reformed) Protestantism.¹⁰⁰

While we must agree with Barth that this is the fateful question that decides the future of Protestantism, there is reason to disagree with him about how this question should be answered.

Protestantism and the Bible: The Lutheran road less traveled

Barth was surely right to see in Bultmann a modern-day heir of Luther, just as their debate on the matter of *Sachkritik* was a modern reprise of Luther and Calvin. Our examination of these debates is not only instructive for making the historical point that from its inception Protestantism has harbored within itself two contrasting models of biblical authority, but also timely because it clarifies the fundamental choice between them that has to be made by Protestants today, who must decide what constitutes the genuine legacy of the Reformation in this matter. What is surprising and even ironic, since it was Luther who gave birth to Protestantism, is how little actual influence his model of biblical authority has had in the history of Protestantism. Hence, the question becomes whether there are any compelling reasons that should lead Protestants today to choose the Lutheran model over its Reformed counterpart. I think there are two: historical and ethical.

The first problem for the Reformed “Scripture principle” is that it is difficult to see how it can be salvaged in the light of the findings of modern historical-critical study of the Bible. Harry Y. Gamble succinctly summarizes the problematic implications for the normative status of the New Testament canon that have arisen

scriptura is subordinated to the material principle of *sola fide*.

99. Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 49.

100. Ibid., 64, referring to Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.7.1.

94. Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 43–44.

95. Ibid., 39.

96. Barth, *Theology of John Calvin*, 386–387.

97. Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 331.

98. “The Zurich Confession” (1545), cited by Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 50. There is, however, at least one Reformed confession from the sixteenth century that in principle affirms Luther’s *Sachkritik*, even while disagreeing with Luther’s exegesis. “The Second Helvetic [Swiss] Confession” (1566), written by Heinrich Bullinger, Zwingli’s successor in Zurich, had this to say on the controverted question of James and Paul: “Wherefore, in this matter we are not speaking of a fictitious, empty, lazy, and dead faith, but of a living, quickening faith. It is and is called a living faith because it apprehends Christ who is life and makes alive, and shows that it is alive by living works. And so James does not contradict anything in this doctrine of ours [*sola fide*]. For he speaks of an empty, dead faith of which some boasted but who did not have Christ living in them by faith (James 2:14 ff.). James said that works justify, yet without contradicting the apostle [Paul] (*otherwise he would have to be rejected*).” *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church* (U.S.A.), Part I: The Book of Confessions (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 1996), 5:111 (italics added). This is a remarkable statement. On the one hand, Bullinger agrees with Calvin’s exegesis of James as a matter of fact; against Luther, James does not contradict Paul. On the other hand, Bullinger agrees with Luther’s willingness to criticize Scripture on behalf of the gospel as a matter of principle (just in case Calvin is wrong and Luther is right about James!). Notwithstanding his affirmation of Protestantism’s formal principle (“We believe and confess the canonical Scriptures...to be the true Word of God,” 5:001), Bullinger upholds the legitimacy of *Sachkritik*. Here, clearly, the formal principle of *sola*

from critical investigation into the history of the canon itself, as well as from exegesis of the documents within the canon.

[T]he limits of the canon cannot any longer be defended on the basis of the explicit warrants adduced on its behalf by the ancient church. Historical criticism has shown that the ancient church was most often mistaken in its claims that the canonical writings were written by apostles, while the history of the canon makes it doubtful that theoretical criteria (apostolicity, catholicity, etc.) were effective reasons for its canonization. For all these reasons, the traditional boundaries of the NT canon have been deprived of clear and self-evident validity.¹⁰¹

The concept of the canon and its normative function has been called into question even more by the exegesis of the NT texts than by the history of the canon. It has been the extraordinary result of modern historical study that among the canonical texts there is a wide range of theological orientations which are not only diverse but to some extent also incompatible and mutually contradictory....By throwing into sharp relief the extent of theological diversity within the canon, historical-critical exegesis has made it impossible to sustain the formal and legal understanding of the canon, widespread in Protestantism and Catholicism alike, according to which the canon is a doctrinal unity possessing equal authority in all its parts, with theological inconsistencies being ruled out in principle. In practical terms, this means that a theological claim cannot now be vindicated by the simple shibboleth, "The NT says....," not because the NT does not say it, but because it says much else besides and not with straightforward consistency. Taken as a whole, therefore, the canon cannot constitute a sharply effective theological norm.¹⁰²

Unless one is committed for whatever reason to the belief that the text of Scripture is verbally inspired by God—which is precisely where Barth departed from Calvin—the canon *per se* loses its absolute authority.¹⁰³ By humanizing the Bible, historical criti-

101. Harry Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 83.

102. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon*, 85–86.

103. Barth spoke of "the fallibility of all the human words of the Bible, of their historical and scientific inaccuracies, their theological contradictions, [and] the uncertainty of their tradition." *Church Dogmatics*, 1.2: 531. He even pointed out that "its capacity for error extends to its religious or theological content." *Church Dogmatics*, 1.2: 509. Though Barth rejected a doctrine of biblical inerrancy, Thompson notes that he also "refused to identify actual errors in the Bible." "Witness to the Word," in *Engaging with Barth*, 194. Gordon H. Clark, an orthodox Calvinist, asks of Barth: "Can Biblical authority survive the abandonment of verbal inspiration?" By "biblical authority" Clark means "the scriptural principle." He candidly admits to being confused by all that Barth denies and affirms about the Bible: "Barth's theory of inspiration is unquestionably a mystery." *Karl Barth's Theological*

What is surprising and even ironic, since it was Luther who gave birth to Protestantism, is how little actual influence his model of biblical authority has had in the history of Protestantism. Hence, the question becomes whether there are any compelling reasons that should lead Protestants today to choose the Lutheran model over its Reformed counterpart. I think there are two: historical and ethical.

cism has abolished the sharp distinction between it and the rest of Christian tradition. It is thus no longer plausible to pit Scripture as a collection of divine words against a merely human tradition of interpretation. Whereas historical criticism has posed a severe challenge to the Scripture principle, Luther's alternative is remarkably able to meet this challenge. His redefinition of "apostolic" and his recognition of theological diversity within the Bible seem uncannily "modern" by comparison.

Oberman deems that, while the Reformation's formal principle has now lost all intellectual credibility, Luther himself would not have been troubled by this loss in the least.

He started from a different and, in fact, contradictory principle, which was to be ignored in the Protestant longing for a "paper pope": "God and the Scriptures are two different things, as different as Creator and creature." This historically innovative principle forms the basis of...a new and crucial point of departure for present-day theology. It is this principle that distinguishes Luther from the biblicism of both his own and later eras.¹⁰⁴

As far as the canon is concerned, Gerhard Ebeling, a Lutheran theologian, says:

[T]he Protestant church possesses complete freedom to revise the canon. This thought can only shock the person who has forgotten that it was not the eighteenth or nineteenth century but Luther who brought this question to the fore....The freedom which he thus proclaimed

Method (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1963), 185, 214.

104. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, 220–221.

toward the early Catholic canon belongs to the essence of the Reformation understanding of the Scriptures.... The content of Scripture does not receive its authority from the fact that it stands in Scripture; on the contrary, Scripture receives its authority from its content.¹⁰⁵

Gamble asks the crucial question that must be posed to adherents of the Scripture principle:

How is it possible, once the theological diversity of the canon is admitted, to give equal authority to all the canonical documents? *Either historical results will not be taken seriously, or a perspective will be found outside the canon which determines how Scripture is to be interpreted, in which case the authority of the canon will be given up anyway....* Each view is in its own way an admission that the formal canon does not and cannot serve as an effective theological norm.¹⁰⁶

It is not surprising, therefore, that Barth, to maintain the Scripture principle of Calvin, had to minimize the significance of historical criticism for theological exegesis.¹⁰⁷ That is no less true of his followers today who accept it grudgingly and only with severe qualifications.¹⁰⁸

105. Ebeling, *The Problem of Historicity in the Church and its Proclamation*, 63–65.

106. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon*, 87 (italics added).

107. Gamble's observation that, in the effort to salvage the scriptural principle, "historical results will not be taken seriously" is demonstrated by Barth's disregard of historical criticism when it does not suit his theological purposes. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his Christianizing exegesis of the Old Testament, a point noted by Bultmann in a letter to Barth (November 11–15, 1952), in *Letters*, 97. On this issue see Paul E. Capetz, "The Old Testament as a Witness to Jesus Christ: Historical Criticism and Theological Exegesis of the Bible according to Karl Barth," in *Journal of Religion* 90:4 (October 2010): 475–506.

108. In the effort to diminish the importance of historical criticism for a theological exegesis of the Bible, one disciple of Barth, Hans W. Frei, has tried to argue—unsuccessfully, in my view—that what the Reformers meant by the literal sense of the text is not what modern historical criticism means by it. *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University, 1974). The truth about the relation between Reformation hermeneutics and modern historical criticism is far better captured by Ebeling's classic essay, "The Significance of the Critical Historical Method for Church and Theology in Proclamation," in *Word and Faith*, trans. James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), 17–61. Oddly, another disciple of Barth, Brevard S. Childs, agrees with Frei, but goes beyond him and moves explicitly in the direction of Roman Catholicism, in order to defend his "canonical" approach to biblical studies. For Childs, not only must one accept the authority of the ancient church that decided the New Testament canon, but also one must say that the literal sense is not the historical sense disclosed by modern criticism; rather, it is the meaning ascribed to the biblical text by the church's confessional tradition. Ironically for someone who claimed to be a Calvinist, Childs repeats the arguments of Luther's opponent John Eck and the decree of Trent without being aware of it. Childs is thus able to salvage the Scripture principle only by ceasing to be a genuine Protestant. See Brevard S. Childs, "The *Sensus Literalis* of Scripture: An Ancient and Modern Problem," in *Beiträge zur alttestamentlichen*

Not all modern Reformed theologians rush to defend the Scripture principle, however. Some esteem Luther as a far better guide in this regard than Calvin.¹⁰⁹ Edward Dowey, who penned the most important book on Calvin during the last century, rendered this verdict:

Calvin had in his hand, as it were, the very instrument by which Luther had already freed himself of slavish adherence to the Bible and tortuous exegesis: the principle of "Christ, the Lord of Scripture"—but he did not wield it.... We must conclude, in fact, that two "interpretations" exist side by side in Calvin's theology concerning the object of the knowledge of faith, because he never fully integrated and related systematically the faithful man's acceptance of the authority of the Bible *en bloc* with faith as directed exclusively toward Christ.¹¹⁰

If, in the usage of the Reformers, two distinct meanings of the phrase "Word of God" can be discerned, one referring to the Bible as an inspired compendium of God's words and the other referring to the gospel, then historical criticism has only highlighted the importance of the latter. For modern Protestants this means that the former meaning has lost all credibility. Indeed, no aspect of the Reformers' program stands in greater need of a complete overhaul than their formal principle of "Scripture alone." If this is no longer tenable, Luther's alternative prevails. Gerrish, who dubs himself "an honest Calvinist," concurs in thinking that Luther's approach has the advantage of being "hospitable to a modern understanding of the Bible."

For one possible response to the theological problems raised by biblical criticism... is to recover Luther's understanding of the Bible as a witness to the revelation in Christ and to discard the medieval remnants that still cling to this thinking.... It has required all the impact of modern scientific, literary, and historical criticism to drive Protestantism back to its original insight.¹¹¹

Theologie: Festschrift für Walther Zimmerli zum 70. Geburtstag, ed. Herbert Donner, Robert Hanhart, and Rudolf Smend (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), 80–93. See Eck, *Enchiridion of Commonplaces against Luther and Other Enemies of the Church*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 13 and "The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent," in *Creeds of the Churches*, ed. John H. Leith, third ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1982), 403–404. Hence, both Frei and Childs confirm Gamble's point, which also applies to Barth.

109. Friedrich Schleiermacher, who was conscious of his allegiance to the Reformed tradition, said: "The authority of Holy Scripture cannot be the foundation of faith in Christ; rather must the latter be presupposed before a peculiar authority can be granted to Holy Scripture." *The Christian Faith*, trans. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 591 (§ 128).

110. Edward A. Dowey Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994; originally published in 1952 by Columbia University Press), 160–162.

111. Gerrish, "The Word of God and the Words of Scripture," in *The Old Protestantism and the New*, 65. For his self-appellation, see

Just as Luther pressed the entire arsenal of humanistic learning into the service of the Reformation, so too historical criticism can be deployed on behalf of Protestant theology today.

Bultmann's signal achievement has been to show both *that* and *how* it is possible to appropriate the insights from biblical religion and literature gained through modern historical research in Protestant theology's effort to provide a critical interpretation of the gospel. In the "Epilogue" to his *Theology of the New Testament* Bultmann gave this classic account of the necessarily reciprocal relationship between the historical and the theological tasks:

Since the New Testament is a document of history, specifically of the history of religion, the interpretation of it requires the labor of historical investigation. The method of this kind of inquiry has been worked out from the time of the Enlightenment onward and has been made fruitful for the investigation of primitive Christianity and the interpretation of the New Testament. Now such labor may be guided by either one of two interests, that of reconstruction or that of interpretation—that is, reconstruction of past history or interpretation of the New Testament writings. Neither exists, of course, without the other, and they stand constantly in a reciprocal relation to each other. But the question is: which of the two stands in the service of the other? Either the writings of the New Testament can be interrogated as the "sources" which the historian interprets in order to reconstruct a picture of primitive Christianity as a phenomenon of the historical past, or the reconstruction stands in the service of the interpretation of the New Testament writings under the presupposition that they have something to say to the present. The latter interest is the one for which historical labor is put to service in the presentation here offered.¹¹²

Whereas the New Testament scholar *qua* historian uses the texts as sources for reconstructing early Christianity as a part of ancient religious history, the same scholar *qua* theologian interprets the texts with reference to the *Sache* which they address. Bultmann was able to make good on the early Barth's programmatic call for a theological exegesis that does not shortchange the indispensable lessons of historical-critical research—in a way Barth himself was never able to pull off—precisely because, as a Lutheran, Bultmann was working with Luther's view of the relation between Scripture and the gospel.¹¹³ Specifically, this entailed *Sachkritik*.¹¹⁴

Gerrish, "The Secret Religion of Germany: Christian Piety and the Pantheism Controversy," in *Continuing the Reformation: Essays on Modern Religious Thought* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1993), 126.

112. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951, 1955), 2:251.

113. Eduard Lohse, "Rudolf Bultmann als Lutherischer Theologe," in *Zeitschrift der Luther-Gesellschaft* 45:2 (1974):49–54.

114. "The dogmatic-axiomatic assertion of the authority of the biblical canon allows Barth's reserve toward a theological *Sachkritik*

Bultmann's signal achievement has been to show both *that* and *how* it is possible to appropriate the insights from biblical religion and literature gained through modern historical research in Protestant theology's effort to provide a critical interpretation of the gospel.

Luther criticized James based on Paul's theology, but he went further than this by indicating that he would even be willing to criticize Paul himself, if Paul said something that was not "apostolic" in the sense of that which "teaches Christ." This is the criticism that Bultmann called for in his debates with Barth. For Bultmann as for Luther, *Sachkritik* is not only the right but also the duty of a Protestant theologian. Accordingly, he insisted that "theological propositions—even those of the New Testament—can never be the object of faith" since "faith can be nothing else but the response to the kerygma" (that is, the gospel), "God's word addressing man as a questioning and promising word, a condemning and forgiving word."¹¹⁵

And that is just where the problem lurks! For both the kerygma and faith's self-understanding always appear in the texts, so far as they are expressed in words and sentences, already interpreted in some particular way—i.e. in theological thoughts.¹¹⁶

Therefore, it is not possible simply and sharply to distinguish kerygmatic statements in the New Testament from theological ones, nor to derive from the New Testament a self-understanding not formulated in theological statements. Nevertheless, he who sets forth a New Testament theology must have this distinction constantly in mind and must interpret the theological thoughts as the unfolding of the self-understanding awakened by the kerygma...¹¹⁷

within the canon to appear as consistent. But if we have to do with human witnesses, as Barth knows we do when dealing with the biblical texts, then the exegete must assume that as human witnesses they bear witness to the theological 'center' more or less adequately (*sachgemäß*). One cannot, as Barth does, approach all interpretations of the Christian faith in the history of theology with the legitimate suspicion that perhaps alien elements (*sachfremde Elemente*) have entered into the witness of the texts on the one hand, while exempting all interpretations within the biblical canon from this criticism on the other hand." Lindemann, *Karl Barth und die kritische Schriftauslegung*, 90.

115. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2:240.

116. *Ibid.*, 2:239.

117. *Ibid.*, 2:240.

Hence, the theological thoughts of the New Testament “can only be the explication of the understanding which is inherent in faith itself” and “may be only relatively appropriate, some more so, others less so.” We must reckon, therefore, with the possibility that in some of these texts, faith’s own self-understanding “may not be clearly developed, that it may be hindered—bound perhaps by a pre-faith understanding of God, the world, and man and by a corresponding terminology.” Accordingly, the demand arises for “content criticism (*Sachkritik*) such as Luther exercised toward the Epistle of James and the Revelation of John.”¹¹⁸ The clear implication of Bultmann’s argument is that the New Testament is the primary source of Christian theology but not its primary norm. This primary norm is prior to the New Testament canon and thus cannot be identical with it. Hence, the canon is a *norma normata* (“normed norm”) yet not itself the *norma normans sed non normata* (“the norm that norms but is not normed”) since this can only ever be the *kerygma* or gospel which each New Testament text seeks to interpret.¹¹⁹

The second problem for the Scripture principle is ethical. The application of this principle has had and continues to have morally reprehensible consequences. Appeal to the Bible has been used to justify the enslavement of Africans, the subordination of women to men as well as their exclusion from ordained ministry, and the categorical moral condemnation of homosexuality. The Enlightenment not only put the twin challenges of natural science and historical criticism on the modern theological agenda, but also posed an ethical challenge to unjust social and economic arrangements that claim divine sanction for themselves. Just as the theological propositions of the New Testament can never be the object of faith, neither can its ethical propositions. Just as the former needs to be demythologized, so too the latter must be “deideologized.” What the Bible says about the state, slavery, gender, and sexuality requires a critical ethical-political hermeneutical method that is the necessary complement to existentialist interpretation.¹²⁰ This

118. Ibid., 2:238.

119. Schubert M. Ogden writes: “Because not even the New Testament is the canon of the church, which is rather the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ that is historically prior to the New Testament, the authority of Scripture for determining the appropriateness of theological assertions is but a derived or secondary authority. Consequently, merely to establish that an assertion is derived from Scripture or warranted by it is not sufficient to authorize the assertion as theologically appropriate. It is further necessary to establish that the scriptural source or warrant for the assertion is itself authorized by the original witness of the apostles, which is the sole primary authority for determining the appropriateness of theological assertions.” “The Authority of Scripture for Theology,” in *On Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 62.

120. Bultmann explained: “To de-mythologize is to deny that the message of Scripture and of the Church is bound to an ancient worldview which is obsolete.” *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 36. Dorothee Soelle was the first to call for a “deideologizing” of Scripture to complement its demythologizing by Bultmann. *Political Theology*, trans. John Shelley (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974). Ogden also sees the need for this: “[I]t is precisely Bultmann’s procedure of existentialist interpretation that not only requires, but also allows for, such further development.” “Women and the Canon: Some Thoughts on the

What the Bible says about the state, slavery, gender, and sexuality requires a critical ethical-political hermeneutical method that is the necessary complement to existentialist interpretation. This has been the major contribution of liberation theologies after Bultmann, yet there is every reason to think it would have met with his approval.

has been the major contribution of liberation theologies after Bultmann, yet there is every reason to think it would have met with his approval.

It is self-evident...that the New Testament’s thoughts about the state and society are incomplete because the possibilities and the problems of forms of the state and society which history has introduced in the meantime could not be present to the minds of the New Testament authors. It is likewise clear that the world of modern science and technology imposes upon believing comprehension new tasks which could not yet occur to the minds of the New Testament period. Therefore the theological thoughts of the New Testament can be normative only insofar as they lead the believer to develop out of his faith an understanding of God, the world, and man in his own concrete situation.¹²¹

Both theologically *and* ethically, therefore, the New Testament can legitimately be criticized.

Theological and ethical implications for today

Unfortunately, recognition of the legitimacy of such criticism has not been characteristic of Protestantism. Not only has historical criticism had to fight for its right, but theological criticism (including ethical criticism) has been met by still greater resistance, even by those who purport to accept historical criticism. Since the moral stakes in retention of the scriptural principle are so high, let us

Significance of Rudolf Bultmann for Theology Today,” in *Doing Theology Today* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 1996), 244. Ogden clarifies that “a deideologizing of the gospel...involves so reinterpreting the gospel’s meaning so as to disengage it from all interpretations whereby in one way or another it has been made to sanction existing injustice and oppression.” “The Concept of a Theology of Liberation: Must Christian Theology Today Be So Conceived?” in *On Theology*, 137.

121. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2:238.

consider one recent example of it. In the still ongoing controversy over homosexuality that has convulsed the Protestant churches, Richard B. Hays has been at the forefront of the opposition to revision of the church's traditional proscription of homosexual relations in any form. Why? For him, it all boils down to biblical authority. The church is to be a "Scripture-shaped community."¹²² Accordingly, the church's fidelity to God or Christ is to be measured by its fidelity to what the Bible says. Exegesis thus replaces ethical argument, since for him Christian ethics is "fundamentally a hermeneutical enterprise":

[I]t must begin and end in the interpretation and application of Scripture for the life of the community of faith. Such a pronouncement will prove controversial in some circles, but it represents the classic confessional position of catholic Christianity, as sharpened in its Reformation traditions.¹²³

Hays refuses to give "a formal apologetic argument in defense of the authority of Scripture" on the grounds that "the most powerful argument for the truth of Scripture is a community of people who exemplify the love and power of God that they have come to know through the New Testament."¹²⁴

His refusal, however, disguises the fact that Hays has conflated the affirmation of biblical authority with his own understanding of it, so that any who dissent are rendered *extra ecclesiam* since, after all, it is non-Christians to whom apologetic arguments are directed. To be sure, he does mention "some who would identify themselves as Christian theologians..."

...for whom the Bible is seen as a source of oppression and moral blindness, particularly with regard to issues of sexual ethics; for such interpreters, the most crucial question about the teaching of the NT is how we can get critical leverage against it.... *Such forthright repudiation of biblical authority by self-identified Christian thinkers is a historical phenomenon that is both relatively recent and unlikely to exercise any lasting influence within the church.*¹²⁵

Not surprisingly, for Hays, what Scripture says on morality is absolute and so overrides any other considerations that might call into question the adequacy of its ethical pronouncements:

[T]he canonical Scriptures constitute the *norma normans* for the church's life, whereas every other source of moral guidance (whether church tradition, philosophical reasoning, scientific investigation, or claims about

122. Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), 10.

123. Ibid., 10.

124. Ibid.

125. Hays, *Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 11, n. 29 (italics added). Would Hays contend that Luther and Bultmann are guilty of this "forthright repudiation of biblical authority"?

Not only has historical criticism had to fight for its right, but theological criticism (including ethical criticism) has been met by still greater resistance, even by those who purport to accept historical criticism.

contemporary religious experience) must be understood as *norma normata*.¹²⁶

For Hays, therefore, it is axiomatic that what the Bible says about homosexuality is normative for Christians today: "the Bible's perspective is privileged, not ours."¹²⁷ He declares:

To take the New Testament as authoritative... is to accept this portrayal [of homosexuality in Romans 1] as "revealed reality," an authoritative disclosure of the truth about the human condition. Understood in this way, the text requires a normative evaluation of homosexual practice as a distortion of God's order for creation.¹²⁸

Hays goes on to ask: "Do we grant the normative force of Paul's analysis?"¹²⁹ But we can ask in reply: Which is it? Is this God speaking or a 1st-century Hellenistic Jew? "Revealed reality" or "Paul's analysis"? Are they the same thing? Given his axiom that Paul speaks for God on this matter, Hays has thus ruled out the possibility of authentic ethical debate in the churches on the question of the morality of homosexuality that might lead us to answer his rhetorical question with a "No, we do not accept Paul's analysis as normative."

By taking what Paul says in Romans 1 as "revealed reality," Hays inverts the actual meaning of the text. Paul himself makes no such appeal to revelation or to Jewish Scripture; instead, he presumes that his case can be defended solely based on reason and experience, thus inviting his readers to give or to withhold their assent to his argument on these terms alone. Paul even employs

126. Ibid., 10.

127. Ibid., 296. Hays has lavish praise for Barth's use of Scripture in ethics. Ibid., 225–239. I once asked a Barthian theologian who teaches at a Presbyterian seminary why he believed that homosexuality is immoral. He answered: "Because the Presbyterian Church is constitutionally committed to a high view of biblical authority." I asked in reply: "Is the Presbyterian Church committed to a high view of the truth? What if the Bible does not teach the truth about the lives of gay people?" He had no further comment. For my analysis of the Presbyterian controversy, see Paul E. Capetz, "Defending the Reformed Tradition? Problematic Aspects of the Appeal to Biblical and Confessional Authority in the Present Theological Crisis Confronting the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)," in *Journal of Presbyterian History* 79:1 (Spring 2001): 23–39.

128. Ibid., 396.

129. Ibid., 397.

the categories of Stoic philosophers to set forth two points: first, nature itself teaches the existence of one deity who is creator of all, so that the Gentiles had no need of Israel's scriptural revelation to know this truth (natural theology); second, homosexuality is immoral because it is "against nature" (natural-law ethics). On his own grounds, the truth of Paul's two claims can only be validated philosophically. But the two claims do not stand or fall together. Paul may be right about the first yet wrong about the second, or vice-versa. If we disagree with Paul's indictment of homosexuality, it is not because we reject "revealed reality" but, rather, because we fail to be convinced rationally and experientially by "Paul's analysis," that is, his first-century Jewish-Hellenistic interpretation of nature as to its moral implications.¹³⁰

From the perspective of those who take the historical and fully human character of the Bible to heart, equating Paul's analysis with revealed reality is tantamount to idolatry: worshiping a god of paper and ink made by human hands! Ironically, Hays illustrates by his own example the invidious moral consequences that follow upon misplaced religious devotion, which is the very point Paul is most concerned to make in Romans 1. The consequences for his fellow human beings who are homosexual are disastrous since Hays's appeal to the Bible only serves to perpetuate their inequality and lack of full participation in the church. The fact that Hays sincerely believes Paul's interpretation is based on supernatural revelation does not change a thing; his failure consists in refusing to defend his view of biblical authority against the alternative Lutheran model (which he never mentions), even though acceptance of his view of homosexuality requires prior acceptance of his own unsubstantiated view of biblical authority.¹³¹

If homosexuality is intrinsically immoral, then let Hays argue the case philosophically as did the apostle Paul, without making an authoritarian appeal to a text artificially exempted from ideological criticism.¹³² Hence, from the perspective of the Lutheran model that Hays implicitly rejects, we have to say that his is not

130. James D. Smart correctly apprehends the crucial insight underlying the demand for *Sachkritik*: "Biblical authors had their own self-understanding which was only in part determined by the revelation of God to which they witnessed.... So also Paul, as an inhabitant of the Hellenistic age, united in himself a self-understanding that belonged to his age with a self-understanding that was the fruit of his hearing of the gospel, the latter alone having power in it to break out of that age into a new one." *The Divided Mind of Modern Theology: Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann 1908–1933* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), 181.

131. Too much Christian theology consists of rationalization of positions that cannot be defended when subjected to critical scrutiny according to strictly public criteria of argument.

132. Ogden explains: "In the nature of the case, no authority, properly so-called, can be a sufficient authorization for the truth of the assertions derived from it or warranted by it. Unless the assertions made by the authority are themselves already authorized as true by some method other than an appeal to authority, no assertion derived from them or warranted by them can by that fact alone be an authorized assertion. This is not to deny, of course, that an assertion authorized by appeal to authority may very well be true. The point is simply that, if it is so, the fact that it is authorized by authority is not itself sufficient to make it so." "The Authority of Scripture for Theology," in *On Theology*, 47.

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a responsible Protestant use of the Bible today. This blunt assessment needs to be made without equivocation as Hays is no fringe figure on the far right of the theological spectrum. He has been a professor at both Yale and Duke Divinity Schools. The difference between Hays and a fundamentalist, however, is merely a difference in degree, not kind. No matter how much he may avail himself of the tools of modern historical criticism, he uncritically assumes that a pre-modern view of Scripture as a revealed text is constitutive of Protestantism without offering a compelling argument why other Protestants should take his view seriously. Furthermore, when he claims that the best argument on behalf of biblical authority is simply the love exemplified by Christians who live according to its precepts, I can only ask why it is that gay people have mostly rejected Christianity claiming it is intrinsically oppressive and consider Christians as hateful people. What about the southern white slaveholders who defended their divine right to own slaves? Did they exhibit the love of God that is supposed to issue from Hays's view of biblical authority?¹³³

In a time when Protestantism finds itself in steady decline, we have to judge Hays's view of biblical authority—and, consequently, of homosexuality—as just another example of what Bultmann called a "false stumbling block" that prevents intellectually serious and morally sensitive people from hearing the gospel and thus being confronted with the real stumbling block of Christian faith.¹³⁴ By means of his appeal to authority, Hays forecloses the possibility of ethics as rational inquiry as being out of bounds for faithful Christians. However, questions regarding the justice of slavery, the equality of women, or the morality of homosexual relations are not exegetical questions; they are ethical questions, which can only be decided by the full critical exercise of human reason.

133. See J. Albert Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), whose analysis of the use of the Bible before and during the Civil War shows that Christians who defended slavery as divinely sanctioned had the strongest exegetical argument whereas the abolitionists had an uphill battle making their case based on the Bible.

134. "De-mythologizing... will eliminate a false stumbling block and bring into sharp focus the real stumbling-block, the word of the cross." Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 36.

Contrary to Hays, the issue is not whether the Bible has authority but wherein its authority properly consists.¹³⁵ For Bultmann, a theological exegesis can only be an existentialist interpretation of the Bible because “theological interpretation of the biblical writings is a way of understanding and explicating their meaning that is oriented by the same existential question to which they themselves intend to give answer.”¹³⁶ This entails, however, that Scripture’s authority “is limited solely to its decisive authority in answering this existential question” of authentic human self-understanding and “does not extend to the various assumptions naturally made by those to whom we owe it when they formulated the preaching of the apostles or explicated the self-understanding arising from the apostolic preaching.”¹³⁷ Ogden explains:

But a still more important implication of Bultmann’s view is that even the consequences that are drawn in the canon for belief and action depend for their authority entirely upon the self-understanding of faith. To the extent that they are indeed necessarily implied by the existential understanding evoked by the New Testament proclamation, they too are normative for witness and theology. But insofar as they are due simply to assumptions made in the situations in and for which this self-understanding was explicated, they no longer have any binding authority....¹³⁸

Clearly, the New Testament’s assumptions about slavery, gender, or sexuality are not binding on contemporary Christians. To insist that they are is to mistake what it is about Scripture that is authoritative, for it confuses the good news of the gospel with the various mixed messages of the Bible, thereby placing a false stumbling block in the way of faith in the gospel.

Barth confessed that if he were forced to choose between historical criticism and the doctrine of inspiration, he would without hesitation adopt the latter. I, however, would choose the former, since the historical-critical method takes the biblical texts seriously as fully human documents of antiquity and thus views them as fallible and subject to criticism. This in no way precludes theological exegesis, as Bultmann has demonstrated. It is only when we are in earnest about their historical character that the typically Protestant form of idolatry, *biblicism*, is forever precluded.¹³⁹ Nothing has

135. Daniel Day Williams correctly said of Bultmann that “he has acutely shown that the issue today cannot be formulated simply as to whether or not the Bible is the supreme authority for Christian faith.” *What Present-Day Theologians are Thinking* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 65.

136. Ogden, “Theology and Biblical Interpretation,” in *Doing Theology Today*, 48.

137. Ogden, “Women and the Canon,” in *Doing Theology Today*, 241.

138. *Ibid.*, 241–242.

139. Surprisingly, it is no longer only antimodernist theologians on the right who reject historical criticism, since nowadays even some postmodernist theologians on the left are denying its value for a theological exegesis. For an analysis of this novel circumstance, see Paul E. Capetz, “Theology and the Historical-Critical Study of the Bible,”

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done more to harm the cause of Protestant ministry and theology in the modern world than this identification of the words of the Bible with the words of God.

Whereas Hays calls for a “Scripture-shaped” church, I call instead for a “gospel-shaped” church. A Scripture-shaped church is precisely the problem, to which a gospel-shaped church is the antidote. Nothing less is at stake than the integrity or, as Paul puts it, “the truth of the gospel” (Gal. 2:5). Accordingly, a gospel-shaped church understands that the gospel is the sole Word of God to which Scripture bears witness and therefore does not view *Sachkritik* as a “forthright repudiation of biblical authority.” Rather, it is emboldened by the precedent of the first Protestant who dared to say: “If our adversaries cite Scripture against Christ, I will cite Christ against Scripture.”¹⁴⁰ Sadly, however, most Protestants who revere Luther’s memory do not follow his example. Amid all the fanfare of global celebrations commemorating the Reformation, we should not fail to note the irony and lament the tragedy that “the ways in which the Reformers were children of their time have triumphed over the ways in which they were pioneers in the use of the Bible.”¹⁴¹

in *Harvard Theological Review* 10:4 (October 2011): 459–488. In the light of Luther’s (and Calvin’s) full embrace of humanistic scholarship, I do not see how those Protestants today who call for a theological exegesis that dispenses with the necessity of historical criticism—which, after all, is a continuation of the humanist legacy—can do so apart from severing their ties to the heritage of Reformation biblical scholarship.

140. Bainton, “The Bible in the Reformation,” 20–21, citing Luther on Gal 3:14 from the Weimar edition of *Luthers Werke* (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–) 40.1: 458 (line 8f.).

141. Paul L. Lehmann, “The Reformers’ Use of the Bible,” *Theology Today* 3 (1947): 342.