

THE PREACHER AND THE HISTORICAL WITNESS OF THE GOSPELS

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WE ARE fortunate today to live in a period in which theological activity is livelier than it has been in many a day. There is a new ferment in speculative theology: witness the essays of Karl Rahner and the stimulating study, *Insight*, by Bernard Lonergan. Such branches of positive theology as patristics, the theology of the Early Middle Ages and nineteenth-century theology, to name but a few, have seen the publication of competent monographs. Yet perhaps no department of theology has recently undergone such sharp changes as the study of Sacred Scripture. Awareness of this fact has now inevitably penetrated beyond the narrow circle of those engaged in research. It has reached the members of the clergy and, indeed, the Church at large. As always, news of change has called forth varied feelings among those whose own lifework precluded participation in this particular enterprise. The word has gone around that the Bible must be read "in a new way," and, above all else, that it is not as easy to discover the meaning of the Gospels as earlier and more ingenuous generations had believed. Some of these reports are enthusiastic exaggerations, due at times to the imprudence of one or two professors. Now and then they can be laid at the door of students who are more naive than they themselves would consider possible. But beneath the exaggerations there remains a substratum of sober fact which needs to be faced.

This is all the more necessary because these reports have shaken the confidence of some priests in their ability to perform an essential part of their ministry, the preaching of the word. These men, most of whom received their theological training before 1943,¹ seriously wonder if what they think they find in Scripture and particularly in the Gospels is really there. Is the method which they were taught to apply to these writings seriously at fault? And if so, what steps can they take, granted the obligations of their present life, to remedy the situation? A state of affairs which evokes questions such as these merits the most serious

¹ The Encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu* was promulgated on Sept. 30, 1943.

consideration. It is obviously impossible in a single essay to provide the preacher with answers to all these perplexing problems. However, a consideration of one of the most serious psychological hazards occasioned by these new developments, i.e., an honest attempt to state it, analyze it, and judge its validity, may be as good a place to tackle this problem as any. However incomplete the attempt may be and however tentative its conclusions, this first step may be of service in helping the preacher understand just what one of these "changes" with regard to the Gospels implies and why the exegete feels that this change should help rather than impede the preacher in his work.

The particular hazard we have chosen to treat is general in nature and concerns the nature of the Gospels as historical sources. It is the assertion, held so commonly by exegetes today that it has now found its way into the textbooks of Introduction to the New Testament, which affirms that the Gospels can no longer be considered as "pure" historical sources.² Here, unfortunately, is a point where rapport between exegete and preacher is not nearly as close as it should be. The preacher finds this statement shattering,³ yet many an exegete cannot for the life of him see why this should be. How can the preacher, he reasons, feel that the truth of his message is imperiled by what is being proposed by exegesis on this point? Surely he is aware that he

² This is equivalently stated in the following description of the nature of the historical witness borne by the Synoptic Gospels: "Nos évangiles sont donc des documents vraiment historiques. Mais comment le sont-ils? En effet, il y a histoire et histoire. La présentation du fait évangélique n'est pas désintéressée, elle est doctrinale" (X. Léon-Dufour, in *Introduction à la Bible 2* [Tournai, 1959] 328). Cf. *ibid.*, A. Feuillet's pages on the fourth Gospel, pp. 666-71, esp. pp. 670-71.

³ This effect is often due to the failure of the preacher to realize the qualified meaning which terms such as "history" and "historian" possess in statements like the following: "Mark was not seeking to write history and is not an historian. His purpose was simpler. He wanted to tell how the Good News concerning Jesus Christ, God's Son, began" (V. Taylor, *The Gospel according to St Mark* [London, 1955] p. 130). Léon-Dufour has accurately expressed the positive and negative connotations of such assertions in the following description of the practice of the Synoptic Evangelists: "Certes ils l'interprètent (le fait), ils le voient selon une optique, qui est celle de la foi. Et cependant la simplicité de la narration et des manières de parler, les difficultés qui découlent d'une telle naïveté dans la présentation doctrinale, l'union indissoluble de la doctrine et du fait qui rend impossible l'adhésion purement intellectuelle à l'Évangile mais requiert la reconnaissance du caractère divin de Jésus, tout cela converge pour montrer que les évangiles ne sont pas une spéculation doctrinale, mais l'attestation d'un fait" (*op. cit.*, p. 329; the emphasis is Léon-Dufour's).

receives his message, the Christian revelation, from the Church? And does not that same Church assure the preacher that the sacred books in which a great and important part of that revelation is contained are inspired and are thus protected from error? Therefore, concludes the exegete, whatever my work may reveal about the nature of the historical witness furnished by the Gospels, the preacher must be aware that he possesses and will always possess a certainty passing that of historical science that what the Evangelists intended to express and succeeded in expressing in their works is absolutely true.

But while this is certainly true of the preacher qua believer, the exegete should not fall under the illusion that this chain of reasoning will remove the present difficulty. The preacher, despite his faith and his office, remains a man and as such lives in a definite milieu whose viewpoints and values he appropriates quite unconsciously. Now no one can deny that our age is historically minded, that it places a higher worth on the results of historical research and sets higher standards of historical accuracy than was true in the past. It is impossible that the attitudes of the modern preacher should be unaffected by this state of affairs.⁴ Like any other child of our times, he wants to know the past accurately, to see it recreated *wie es eigentlich geschehen*, especially when that past touches him so closely as does the life of Jesus. Secondly, the preacher has been formed by a definite training. He was instructed in his seminary quite as thoroughly as the exegete in the irreplaceable value of Christian faith and the unshakable security it should afford him. He is equally conscious of the implications of the doctrine of scriptural inspiration. But he was also told that his acceptance of the Christian revelation should never be a leap into the void with eyes tightly shut, but, on the contrary, that though based on the authority of God, this act should be both reasonable and prudent. It is precisely here that the preacher feels that the modern view of the

⁴ The preacher can measure the value he sets on precise historical statement by measuring his reaction to the following judgment of the nature of the Gospel accounts: "Often, when we look for the value of a particular passage, we may find that its primary value is other than historical" (J. L. McKenzie, in *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 21 [1960] 285). If he should feel that a passage of which the above might be justly said, e.g., the temptation story in Mt and Lk, had for this reason lost much, if not all, value for him, he is gravely overvaluing the value of historical interest. Inasmuch as we are all tempted in this direction, we show in this the influence of our age.

historical witness of the Gospels fails him. Confronted with it, he is tempted to reason as follows. The life of the Son of God on earth is the heart of the Christian revelation, and the main historical sources for that life are the four Gospels. Therefore, if the Gospels are not reliable sources, how can my faith be ever reasonable or prudent?⁵ But if the Gospels are not purely historical accounts, i.e., if they expressed what the early Church believed took place in the years of Christ's life rather than what actually happened, how can I trust them? The preacher is quite aware that it is not his function to establish the historical worth of the Gospels. He is content to leave that to the historian of Christian origins, the exegete, and the professor of apologetics. But he insists that their historical trustworthiness is a truth which must be established for him by reasons he can understand and accept before he can devote himself with peace of soul to his own work. What is bothering him at present is that the exegetes apparently have undermined the process by which his professors established this truth for him and have given him nothing with which to replace it.⁶

PURE HISTORICAL SOURCE

Before answering these questions directly, it will be well to examine this concept of "pure" historical source which the preacher feels must be predicated of the Gospels if their accounts are to be considered reliable. The concept, strange as it may appear, is relatively recent in origin, having been formulated by the German school of history which flourished during the last century, the historico-critical school. Founded by Ludwig von Ranke (1795-1886) and Theodor Mommsen (1817-

⁵ The statement placed in the mouth of the preacher in the text is an exaggeration, although it has been heard once or twice. The number of Christians would be sharply reduced, if the scientific demonstration of the fact of Jesus from the Gospels were the only valid basis for the judgments of credibility and credentia. However, the preacher is correct in believing that this demonstration, though admittedly difficult, cannot be so exacting as to be practically impossible. Such hypercriticism, murmurs of which have sometimes been heard on the exegetical side of this modern Great Divide, would seem to run counter to the statements of the Vatican Council on the significance of "facta divina," and in particular of miracles and prophecies in the act of divine revelation (*DB* 1790, 1812-13).

⁶ Léon-Dufour (*op. cit.*, p. 322) summarizes the routine argument for the historicity of the Gospels and points up some of its lacunae. His entire chapter ("Les évangiles et l'histoire") offers the replacement which we imagine the preacher desiring. Other useful treatments of this are: C. H. Dodd, *History and the Gospel* (London, 1938), and E. Hoskyns and N. Davey, *The Riddle of the New Testament* (3rd ed., London, 1947).

1903) and brought to a climax by Eduard Meyer (1885–1930), the ideal of this school was to create a historical methodology which would treat its subject matter as objectively as the natural sciences. Like the physicist and chemist, these men strove to see the past unmoved by the passions and controversies which its decisive events still arouse. They wished to reconstruct as true and complete a picture of what had actually taken place—*wie es eigentlich gewesen*—as was humanly possible.⁷

The writing of so exacting a type of history naturally demanded a careful evaluation and sifting of historical sources. In composing his histories of Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, von Ranke had discovered a category of primary source which was particularly adapted to his purpose. These were *Urkunden*, i.e., official documents contemporary with the past events, and luckily for von Ranke the archives of the chancelleries of Europe were well stocked with them. Those which were particularly helpful to him were found in the Venetian archives, where the reports of the various ambassadors of the Città della Laguna had been preserved. These were accurate, detailed, dispassionate accounts, based either on the personal observation of the envoys or on what their trained judgment had found credible in the information supplied by their agents. Von Ranke rightly judged these accounts to be as reliable a historical source as any historian was likely to discover. His experience showed that they distorted the facts far less than the accounts of those who had been closely involved in those great events or of historians who sought literary laurels. So, after examining his *Urkunden* carefully, he rested much of the great histories he composed on the data they furnished him. Now von Ranke's works were more than merely successful; they were rightly judged to be masterpieces of historical writing. Their success consequently canonized the ideal of the "pure" historical source, i.e., an account of the past set down by onlookers who sought to be precise, detailed, and above all else objective.

As luck would have it, this ideal of history and its "pure" source was developed in precisely the age and country where the historical study of the Gospels was most intense. The influence of the Enlightenment was felt everywhere in Protestant Germany, and many of the brightest

⁷ W. F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity* (2nd ed.; Baltimore, 1946) pp. 48–49.

spirits in Lutheranism were encouraged by it to free themselves from the "bonds of outdated dogma" by going in quest of the "historical Jesus."⁸ In these circumstances it was inevitable that these two currents should converge; indeed, they fused so inextricably that the von Ranke ideal of history and a modified form of his methodology still dominate biblical criticism whether Protestant or Catholic. As we look back on the past, we see that this influence has been both beneficial and harmful to biblical studies. As Albright remarked: "It is obvious that, whatever happens to future history, scholars must always be profoundly grateful to the men who were the first to recognize the supreme importance of accuracy and completeness, both in defining facts and in explaining changes."⁹ But if the ideal undoubtedly led to great advances in the science of history, the enormous success of the method canonized by that ideal in the field of European and classical history was not always repeated when applied elsewhere. For its very success tempted epigoni who were not gifted with the historical tact of the master to attribute universal applicability to this particular way of studying the past and therefore to apply woodenly the methodology which had been fruitful in rediscovering one or two ages to the history of every land and time. The belief began to be held that, if a historical source was not "pure," it was not very reliable.

This generalization had grave effects in the field of biblical criticism, where the stage of historical action was the Ancient Near East during the millennia covered by the Old and New Testaments. As far as the New Testament was concerned, the unimaginative application of what came to be called the historico-critical method resulted in a ceaseless series of judgments all of which tended to discredit the historical worth of the canonical Gospels. From the very start of the process scholars became aware that one of the Gospels at least failed to measure up to the ideal of the "pure" historical source. This was the fourth Gospel, which was soon unanimously judged to be lacking in this regard and therefore—and here was the fatal error—was held to possess little, if

⁸ A. Schweitzer has given memorable expression to the spirit in which this quest was first undertaken: "Das Dogma musste erst erschüttert werden, ehe man den historischen Jesus wieder suchen, ehe man überhaupt den Gedanken seiner Existenz fassen konnte. Dass er etwas anderes ist als der Jesus-Christus der Zweinaturenlehre, scheint uns heute etwas Selbstverständliches" (*Von Reimarus zu Wrede* [Tübingen, 1906] p. 3).

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 49.

any, value as a source for the history of Jesus. Looking back a trifle ruefully on this period, Anton Fridrichsen, a leader in the modern Scandinavian school of exegesis, summed up the historico-critical school's rejection of this work in vivid terms:

To an older generation it seemed self-evident that the Gospel of St John must be regarded as altogether secondary to the Synoptic Gospels. The life and teaching of Jesus are to be found in the Gospel of St Mark and in the logia-source of St Matthew and St Luke. In St John we do not find history, but a theological construction on the basis of, and with its starting-point in, certain Synoptic motifs. The Evangelist aimed at describing the work and teaching of Jesus, His death and Resurrection, in forms and language which appealed to his own religious outlook and experience. Consequently Jesus speaks St John's own language and proclaims his thoughts. The narratives are saturated with Johannine Christ-mysticism and Johannine speculation; they have a double basis, since a symbolic and allegorical character has been added to them which has nothing to do with authentic history. Everywhere the theological reflections of the Evangelist, or of the Johannine circle, obtrude themselves; and when in certain indirect allusions he [the Evangelist] pretends that the Gospel was written by one of Jesus's disciples and most intimate friends, this is a literary artifice to confer the highest rank and authority on the book. Thus the Gospel of St John does not belong to history except as a factor in, and an original document for, the history of dogma. The Evangelist, or his circle, has developed Pauline theology further towards mysticism, has purified its language from all Judaism, and subordinated it to the universal scope of the Greek notion of the Logos.¹⁰

The effects of the two influences we mentioned, the distaste of the man of the Enlightenment for dogma and his acceptance of the von Ranke "pure" source as the only reliable basis for scientific history, pervade the above paragraph, in which the testimony of the fourth Evangelist was waived completely out of court. Despite his transcendent claims, which are an integral part of the historical record, Jesus was placed on the same level as any other individual of the past, and an attempt was made to write His history on this basis. The source texts which came under scrutiny were valued to the extent to which they provided "authentic material," reliable biographical data, i.e., the words which Jesus actually pronounced at the various points of time described in the sources, and the events as they appeared to the bystanders at the moment of their occurrence. Any theological constructions which were

¹⁰ "Jesus, St John and St Paul," in *The Root of the Vine* (New York, 1953) pp. 53-54.

placed on the facts, i.e., the use of symbolism, the interpretation of prior events in the light of events which happened after the human career of Jesus, the use of categories other than those employed by the Master Himself, were excised from the record on the plea that such have nothing to do with "authentic history." Furthermore, because he was not a Rankian before von Ranke, the fourth Evangelist was judged to have had no contact with Jesus' intimate friend. Because he expressed the teaching of the Lord in his own words and forms of thought, he was paid the great but dubious compliment of being considered the author, not only of the expression, but of the thoughts themselves. Despite the recurrence of the phrase "Johannine circle," both Master and Evangelist were imagined to have existed and worked in the individualistic manner characteristic of post-Renaissance man, and no attention was really paid to the bonds of tradition which might possibly have bound them together. Fridrichsen's judgment is echoed by many moderns: "This critical view of St John's Gospel is based on patent facts. But have the right conclusions been drawn from them?"¹¹ What was responsible for this completely negative judgment of the historical worth of the fourth Gospel was neither St. John nor the work of accurate analysis performed by the scholars of the historico-critical school. What was wrong was the absolute reliance on one kind of historical source and the mechanical transfer of the methodology associated with it from one definite period of history to another which differed widely from it.

However patent it may appear to us, this truth was not immediately evident to the scholars of the nineteenth century. The entire second half of that century was devoted to seeking the "pure" historical source which would surrender the authentic data which finally they, the men of the Enlightenment, would interpret adequately.¹² As the quotation from Fridrichsen makes clear, the canonical Gospels of Matthew and Luke were also found to be defective as "pure" sources, although the sentence of condemnation was never so strongly phrased

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹² Fridrichsen describes the results of this division of labor: the first century providing a historical kernel which should be interpreted by the nineteenth: "The application of this method in research concerning Jesus led inevitably to preposterous results. A picture of Jesus was drawn which was simply the idealized self-portrait of man in the nineteenth century" (*art. cit.*, pp. 54-55). Despite this bias, these years of investigation gave scholars precious insights into the sources which lie behind the Synoptic tradition.

as in the case of John. As a result, the historian was reduced to two "pure" sources: the Gospel of Mark, which provided the only historical account of Jesus' actions, and the famous Logia or Q, which alone reproduced His teaching accurately.

These two documents provided the basis on which the Liberal school of theology attempted for forty years to recover a Jesus whom they could understand and revere without invoking the dogmas of the past.¹³ It was because of this double presupposition, i.e., that the combination of the philosophy of the Enlightenment with the historical skills of the nineteenth century had *de facto* recovered the true Jesus of Nazareth, that the Liberal school was shaken to its foundations in 1901 by Wrede's demonstration that dogmatic ideas had shared in the shaping of the Marcan Gospel. Wrede's book forced them to admit that, far from being the "authentic record" they had imagined it to be, the Gospel of Mark, as its title had always proclaimed, was in its way quite as theological as the fourth Gospel. What made the work of Wrede appear so negative to the Liberals that it caused them to despair was not that he had proved, as he and they thought, that the second Gospel was unhistorical. What Wrede had proved was rather that the concept of the "pure" historical source which the historico-critical school had canonized fitted Mark no better than the other Gospels.

At this juncture Form-Criticism entered the picture. If the fourth Gospel, Mt, Mk, and now the two documents which lay behind the common Synoptic tradition were all found to have been "contaminated" by theological interpretations, the only hope of finding the Jesus of history on the presuppositions of the historico-critical school was to sift the oral tradition which on Luke's admission had been the point of departure of the entire process. But the work of the Form-Critics only confirmed what earlier scholars had found to be true of the later stages of the gospel tradition. Each of these forms or genres,¹⁴ be they "prophetic and apocalyptic sayings," "interpretations of the Law" or

¹³ I.e., between 1863, when H. J. Holtzmann published his epoch-making commentary on the Synoptics, and 1901, when Wrede's *Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien* appeared. For a rounded picture of the merits and weaknesses of Holtzmann's achievement, cf. W. G. Kümmel, *Das Neue Testament: Geschichte der Erforschung seiner Probleme* (Freiburg-Munich, 1958) pp. 185-86.

¹⁴ These examples of "forms" are taken from G. Bornkamm's recent excellent classification of the Synoptic material, "Formen und Gattungen II. Im NT," *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* 2 (3rd ed.; Tübingen, 1958) 1000-1001.

“rules for the community,” “Christ-stories” or “Jesus-stories,” presented the Master, not as He had appeared to the half-opened eyes of contemporaries, but as seen in His full dignity by Christians, i.e., by those who had accepted Jesus’ testimony to Himself, His work, and His nature.¹⁵ With all the possible material for research thus exhausted, the truth began to dawn on scholars: either the “pure” historical source was not an absolute requisite for the writing of “authentic history,” or they would have to abandon all hope of knowing the Lord Jesus by means of that science. They would have to be content with the Christ of faith. This is the dilemma which also faces the modern preacher who insists on a “pure” historical source. For if there is one point which the work of these many years has established for all, Catholic and Protestant, it is that none of the Christian sources for the life of Jesus which we possess can be so denominated.

Although many scholars chose and are still resigned to the second alternative, to be content with the Christ of faith,¹⁶ others began to wonder if the impasse was not due to the method employed rather than to the sources. Despite the merits revealed by the von Ranke method in elucidating the Reformation period in Europe, was it the only way in which scientific history could be written in our age? Or—and this conclusion was nearer to the truth—was it neither the sources nor the method which was at fault? Was it not rather that substantials had been confused with accidentals, with the result that the method was being applied quite unimaginatively to the history of Christ? It is Fridrichsen again who shows us what these men had been ignoring in their routine application of von Ranke’s method to the Gospels:

Gradually, however, the conviction has grown that this is not the way to study and interpret ancient Eastern religious documents. An Israelite prophet or a Jewish Messiah cannot be understood solely in terms of Western thought in the nineteenth century. The man of God is never isolated. He is always the centre of

¹⁵ E.g., careful study of their form has convinced Bornkamm that the Jesus-stories mentioned in the text were told “[um] Glauben und Erkenntnis zu wecken,” whereas the Christus-stories were narrative expressions of Christian faith. “[Sie] sind . . . von vornherein und im ganzen von diesem Glauben geprägt.” Similar investigation has shown that all the elements in the Synoptic tradition presuppose this faith and present their narratives from that viewpoint.

¹⁶ Cf. the discussion of the *Kerygma-Theologie* in N. A. Dahl, “Der historische Jesus als geschichtswissenschaftliches und theologisches Problem,” *Kerygma und Dogma* 1 (1955) 112–13.

a circle taught by his words and example, in which his manner of life and teaching continues after his death. What is taught and written in this circle is ultimately derived from its founder and embodies his life and character. When we, the children of a later age and of another culture, wish to understand such a person and his period, we must return to tradition and inquire there; but our inquiry must be made with due understanding of local peculiarities. Only with such a sympathetic understanding is it possible to estimate a tradition as a source of history. No appreciation can be acquired without insight into the habits of life and thought of prophetic circles in ancient Israel, or of Jews of Rabbinic education and Messianic outlook. It will become clear that tradition is an excellent source for history, if the history we have in mind is the conduct of life in associations governed and influenced by persons who in some extraordinary way speak with divine authority. But it will soon also be found that no biographical or psychological account of such figures can be given. They cannot be viewed as individualists in their consciousness or their behaviour; their souls are of quite a different structure from those of modern European men. Real understanding is only possible after considering the legacy they leave to their circles, and the tradition formed, preserved and continually propagated within them. This of course does not imply that in principle one is to refrain from isolating earlier and later strata within a tradition, or from determining as far as possible, by critical observation and reflection, facts and utterances immediately associated with whatever person is the object of research. But it means that one cannot hope in this way to study the character of a prophet as a modern historian would. No conception of him can be formed except by observing how he was remembered, described and quoted, and what was handed down about him. All these things form a totality of which he was the soul, because he did not keep his soul to himself, but gave himself to those who received his words, his nature and his will into themselves. Therefore, from the point of view of what is demanded in a modern biography, any statement concerning men of God in the ancient East must appear extremely unsatisfactory, uncertain and fragmentary as an exercise in biography or in character study. But to one who has liberated himself from the narrow view and limited experience of the Historico-critical School, tradition itself in all its abundance, variation and multiplicity will be the mirror in which historical reality is reflected. What has here been stated in general terms is relevant to a long line of Biblical persons, to Isaiah and Jeremiah as well as to Jesus and John the Baptist.¹⁷

Let us insist on one thing here: Fridrichsen is not lowering in any way the high standard for scientific history set by Ludwig von Ranke. Equally with that scholar, he wishes to know the history of Jesus, *wie es eigentlich geschehen*. He, too, will strive to explain how that particular history came to pass, *wie es eigentlich geworden*. But he is at once less dogmatic and more modest than other followers of the great historian.

¹⁷ *Art. cit.*, pp. 55-56.

He admits in practice what the sources emphasize: the special nature of the central figure of this history ("a man of God in the ancient East") and the peculiar conditions of the stage on which He acted His part. Moreover, he will permit the circle around Jesus to interpret their Master to us, aware that Jesus rather than His followers is the source of what they say, even though they may formulate it in their own way. But, above all else, Fridrichsen is aware of the nature of historical method and of the danger of transforming it into historical dogma. He denies all absolute value to any particular historical methodology, no matter how refined it may be, and insists that the methods which the historian employs must be adapted to his sources and not vice versa. If no "pure" historical sources are discoverable, then the historian must seek out the possibilities for "authentic history" proffered by the sources in existence. These may not be those he would like to have, e.g., the witness of uncommitted onlookers. They may rather be a tradition formed by those "who received his words, his nature and will into themselves." He realizes as a scientific historian that this type of source will be quite difficult to handle, for the preoccupation of his authors will differ from his. But he will not abandon them for all that; he will create tests to determine the measure of historical accuracy contained in the statements of his witnesses. The tradition may not strive to answer the questions he would like to place. He will note what it considers important, and he will be content if his particular interests are partially satisfied. This attitude of Fridrichsen and others, more open, modest, but scientifically quite as rigorous as that of his predecessors, has replaced the frustration caused by the work of Wrede and his fellows, and it has set moving a new quest for the historical Jesus.¹⁸

¹⁸ Cf. J. M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus* (Naperville-London, 1959). Conservative scholars have tended to avoid the term "the historical Jesus" because of the distinction which those who coined it erected between it and the "Christ of faith." It is doubtful if we can do without some such term in the present discussion. Dahl (*art. cit.*, p. 104) has redefined it as follows: "[The term 'the historical Jesus'] denotes Jesus, inasmuch as He is the object of methodical, critical, historical investigation, and the picture of Him which can be drawn as the result of such study." By transferring the concept from the ontological to the epistemological realm, Dahl avoids the implications which had rendered the term unacceptable to traditional Christians. It is used in this sense in the present paper. Cf. also on this "new quest" J. Jeremias, "The Present Position of the Controversy concerning the Problem of the Historical Jesus," *ET* 69 (1958) 333-39, and P. Althaus, "Der gegenwärtige Stand der Frage nach dem historischen Jesus," *Sitzberichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Phil.-hist. Klasse* (Munich, 1960).

This new quest is, if anything, more difficult than the preceding one, but the very awareness of the difficulties involved makes it more circumspect and safer. Recognition that the developing tradition which embraces our Gospels in its sweep can be "an excellent source for history" is only the first step in a long and arduous process. The scientific historian must first show that the tradition he uses is authentic, i.e., it derives ultimately from contemporaries of the events and was set down in an honest attempt to present what the Master said and did. A careful study of the contents, the mode of transmission, and the intention displayed by those involved in producing our Gospels has made it certain that our four canonical Gospels substantially belong in this category, whereas the apocryphal gospels, globally considered, belong with equal certainty to the category of pseudo tradition which is defined as "the result of an intentional fabrication of history." This justifies the *presumption* that any pericope in our Gospels is broadly speaking historical and allows the historian to advance to his second stage.

The historian's second step involves classifying, weighing, and determining the exact historical value of the various elements which form this authentic tradition. This does not imply any doubt as to the trustworthiness of any particular pericope, for all belong to what has been shown to be authentic tradition. But the very notion of a growing tradition and a brief examination of the gospel material combine to show that this authentic tradition is not all of one piece. First, despite the brief space of time which elapsed between the resurrection of our Lord and the first Gospel, analysis of the Gospels reveals that the tradition crystallized in them contains elements belonging to earlier and later strata. Secondly, all these strata contain a variety of forms or genres. Since none of these forms intend to express the event or saying to which they bear witness in strictly historical statement, as that phrase is understood today, the historian must determine the precise intention implicit in the original form and that revealed by the particular use which the Evangelist has made of it. This done, he must decide the extent to which these two distinct intentions have influenced the statement in his text, and in the light of these considerations judge exactly what can be deduced from it concerning the event or saying in the life of our Lord which is being reported. This is a delicate business, which can be safely accomplished only by a formed historian who has

been trained in the evaluation of ancient texts generally and of the Gospel texts in particular.¹⁹

PARABLE OF THE SOWER

We shall realize the need for a trained observer fully only if we see the process in the concrete. Let us take, then, the well-known parable of the Sower and follow the historian as he studies it. He approaches his task with a double hypothesis firmly held in mind. The first of these he derives from a general study of the Synoptic Gospels, whereas the second is the result of a careful investigation of the entire New Testament. In order to see what is implied here, let us enumerate some of the judgments which are contained in each of these complex hypotheses. The first, which is based on the Synoptics, concerns the concrete historical situation created in Palestine by the appearance of Jesus of Nazareth. This involves definite judgments about the nature of Jesus' activity on earth, i.e., that His preaching was eschatological, salvific, exclusively religious, and challenging.²⁰ Based on these, further judgments concern the relationships His activity created between our Lord and those with whom He came into contact (His adversaries, the people in general, His disciples), the quality of these relationships at various points of His career, and the general lines along which they developed. Thirdly, judgments derived from many texts pertain to more particular aspects of Jesus' being and activity. For example, His language is presumed to have been Aramaic, His way of expressing Himself concrete, popular, Palestinian; His persevering use of parable is conceived to have been directed to the purpose to which that genre tends by its nature. What we have termed the first hypothesis is, therefore, a whole chain of tentative judgments, resulting from controlled observation, each of which combines with all the others to form the mosaic which reveals to the observer an approximation of what Jesus' life was really like.²¹

¹⁹ Cf. Léon-Dufour, *op. cit.*, pp. 323-31, for a brief but clear outline of a modern demonstration of the historical worth of the Gospels.

²⁰ R. Schnackenburg, *Gottes Herrschaft und Reich* (Freiburg, 1959) pp. 49-76. We might also add (with S., pp. 77-88) that the remainder of Jesus' salvific activity was intended by Him to be a sign of the proleptic presence of the Rule of God.

²¹ It may be useful to emphasize the nature of the assent which the historian gives to these hypotheses. As the Greek root suggests, these supply a foundation or basis for the investigation to be undertaken. The German term *Vorverständnis*, "preunderstanding,"

And this is only the first hypothesis. The second of these two hypotheses concerns a distinct historical situation, that of the Early Church after the events of Easter and Pentecost. It involves judgments about the activity of that Church, the scope of that activity—be it kerygmatic, catechetical, liturgical—and its purpose: tending to conversion, instruction, exhortation, prayer. Besides these, this hypothesis contains definite judgments about the relationships which existed between the Church and normative Judaism, the various fringe sects, the Jewish people in general, proselytes, pagans. In addition, judgments about the methods employed by the Christian community in mediating the traditions about Jesus belong to this second hypothesis, i.e., the interests which lay behind this activity, the literary forms it inherited, modified, or created in the service of those interests, the theological terminology in which it expressed itself. All these various judgments are assented to with various degrees of probability or certitude according to the strength of the converging elements which sustain them. Before he turns to his text, therefore, the historian is in possession of a body of knowledge concerning the two points which are most relevant to his enquiry: the period of the public life of our Lord and the period in which the Church was enshrining her memories of the Master in durable form.

Presupposing this background which will provide the criteria for his future judgments, the historian turns to his particular text, the parable

specifies the nature of this foundation. These hypotheses are composed of a series of judgments which express the best solutions which the previous study of the historian has uncovered for the various problems of the Gospel texts. Inasmuch as they are *judgments*, these solutions are firmly held, because a great number of individual texts converge to support them. Inasmuch as they are *prejudgments*, which have been made antecedently to and independently of the detailed analysis of the text under investigation (in the present instance, the parable of the Sower), these solutions are considered to be highly probable but not definitive. They have enough support in the Gospel texts to provide a reasonable starting point for serious investigation. However, the historian is ready to modify them, or to abandon them in part or *in toto*, if further study of his texts imposes either of these decisions on him. This is the well-known "heuristic circle" which is typical of the *Geisteswissenschaften* and must not be confused with the illegitimate logical circle. Here the argumentation is not linear as in logic, but all conclusions arrived at are a result of a convergence of individual facts. The heuristic circle here is a means for establishing this convergence. Cf. also the stimulating articles of Bultmann on this point: "Ist voraussetzungslose Exegese möglich?" *TZ* (Basel) 13 (1957) 409-17 (incorporated in *Glauben und Verstehen* 3 [Tübingen, 1960]), and "Wissenschaft und Existenz," in *Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben* (*Festschrift A. Schweitzer*, 1955); also in *Glauben und Verstehen* 3, 107-21).

of the Sower.²² But first he will note the context in which this story is found in the Gospels. The Sower is not preserved as an isolated parable but is set at the head of a chapter where a number of related parables appear.²³ All these parables, with the exception of the Sower, treat explicitly of the kingdom of God. Moreover, they all describe various organic processes more or less according to the same pattern. They contrast two stages in an organic process, the initial and the final, the little mustard seed and the great shrub, the small amount of leaven and the batch of bread which the leaven causes to rise, the passive husbandman and his sudden activity at the moment of harvest, the period when grain and weeds are allowed to grow together and the moment when they must be separated.²⁴ Thirdly, his knowledge of the Old Testament makes it easy for the historian to identify the point of time in the history of salvation connoted by the second stage of the parable. The great shrub which gives shelter to the birds of the air is a traditional image for a great kingdom.²⁵ The images of the harvest and the husbandman putting in the sickle evoke the eschatological moment, the end of time and the judgment.²⁶ It is, therefore, clear to him that the moment Jesus intends the second stage of these parables to represent is that so ardently hoped for by the Jewish people. It is the moment when the glorious kingdom would be inaugurated and God would close His accounts with His people. These parables, therefore, belong to the eschatological preaching of Jesus.

In addition, the identification of the final stage leads the historian to what our Lord intended the first stage to represent. He recalls the aspects of that stage which the parables present. The mustard seed is

²² The writer is particularly indebted to the following studies of Mk 4:1-9, 13-20 and parallels (the names in brackets indicate how these works will be cited in future notes): N. A. Dahl, "The Parables of Growth," *Studia theologica* 5 (1952) 132-66 [Dahl II]; J. Jeremias, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu* (2nd ed.; Zurich, 1952) [Jeremias]; J. Schmid, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (4th ed.; Regensburg, 1958) [Schmid]; R. Schnackenburg, "Die Lehre der Wachstumsgleichnisse," in *Gottes Herrschaft und Reich* (Freiburg, 1959) pp. 98-109 [Schnackenburg]; V. Taylor, *The Gospel according to St Mark* (London, 1955) [Taylor].

²³ This is true of Mt and Mk. Lk reproduces the Marcan complex in his parallel chapter 8 only as far as the interpretation of the Sower.

²⁴ So Jeremias, p. 99; Dahl II, pp. 146, 147-52 *passim*.

²⁵ Dahl II, p. 147, n. 2, cites as evidence here: Dn 4:11, 18 (Theod 4: 12, 21), Ez 31:6, Jg 9:15, Lam 4:20, 1 Bar 1:12.

²⁶ Schnackenburg, p. 106, follows Jeremias, p. 96, in relating the abnormally large mass of dough in the parable of the Leaven to the plenitude of the *Gottesherrschaft*.

small and insignificant, the leaven adds the note of hidden activity. The inactivity of the husbandman is what is stressed in the first half of the Grain Growing Secretly. The Tares insist that at first the weeds must be allowed to grow together with the grain. In addition, the historian recalls that the idea of growth or process, which underlies all these parables, relates and contrasts all these aspects of activity or inactivity with a definite point of time, the moment when the kingdom will come in glory.²⁷ These observations, together with the knowledge of the nature of Jesus' preaching gained from His background, naturally lead him to identify the first stage of each of these parables with Jesus' own ministry, which had given rise to messianic hopes and yet seemed in many ways thoroughly unmessianic.

For the contrast between the hopes Jesus caused to rise and the way He conducted Himself was a burning problem in our Lord's lifetime. Because of it, the Baptist had permitted himself to ask: "Is it thy coming that was foretold, or are we yet waiting for some other?" (Mt 11:3). Jesus had answered him indirectly, by reminding him of the prophecy of Isaiah (*ibid.*, vv. 4-5). And now the parables of growth answer the same difficulty with a different reference, but in the same elliptical manner. The Jewish people had expected that the future kingdom would be glorious, but Jesus, despite His acts of power, appeared to them at times quite ordinary. They had thought that the coming of the kingdom would completely change the conditions of this world, yet the world went on very much as it had previously, although Jesus was there. The Jews undoubtedly wondered why Jesus did not use the means for establishing His kingdom which were obviously practical in that period, i.e., the force recommended by the zealots, or why He insisted on being on friendly terms with sinners, instead of creating a "pure" community as the Essenes of Qumrân had done. Jesus answered all these expectations, as He had in the case of the Baptist, with a challenge to observe and reflect. Look at the mustard seed, the leaven, the grain growing secretly, the tares, and note above all to what

²⁷ Dahl II, p. 146, interprets the phenomenon of growth in these parables as follows: "To the growth which God in accordance with his own established order gives in the sphere of organic life, corresponds the series of events by which God in accordance with his plan of salvation leads history towards the end of the world and the beginning of the new aeon. This should, however, not be taken to mean that we must seek the point of the parables in this idea of growth. Rather, it is presupposed as a matter of course."

they lead. "The apparent smallness and insignificance of what is happening does not exclude the secret presence of the coming kingdom. . . . The lesson of [these parables] is thus, not so much the great results of the work of Jesus, as it is the 'organic unity' between his ministry and the future Kingdom of God."²⁸ These are parables of contrast, but underneath the contrast there is unity.

The historian has noted that Mt and Mk had placed the Sower at the head of the chapter in which these parables were preserved. This leads him to compare this parable with the members of the group. On examination, its structure appears to be analogous to theirs. Here, too, a first stage in a natural process is contrasted with the ultimate: a single action is described which was initially unsuccessful, but ultimately extremely effective. Moreover, as in the other parables, the richness of the harvest is a familiar Jewish symbol for the eschatological kingdom.²⁹ However, stress is laid in this parable on the aspect of failure to an extent not found in the others. Nevertheless, as the parable expresses but two contrasting ideas, these first three images (birds, etc.) must be taken as variants of the theme of failure. Moreover, despite the emphasis on failure, the main stress of the parable is not placed there but on the final stage. Both its position and the exceptional triple yield³⁰ indicate that here the story reaches its climax. Structure and imagery, therefore, combine to suggest that this parable, like the others, is meant to convey a definite aspect of the mystery of the kingdom of God.

If the parable of the Sower thus interpreted fits easily into the picture which the historian had previously constructed of Jesus' ministry in Palestine, the same is true of the vocabulary and literary genre exemplified by this pericope. The vocabulary of these few verses points unmistakably to a Semitic background. The use of the definite article where we should favor the indefinite (Mk 4:3, 4, 5, 7, 8); the phrase *para tēn hodon*, which chose the weaker alternative of the ambiguous Aramaic 'al'urha; the secondary Semitisms: *anabainein* for the springing up of the corn (4:7, 8) and *didonai karpon* (4:8), all indicate that

²⁸ Dahl II, p. 148.

²⁹ Dahl II, p. 153 cites as OT witness for the note of exceptional fertility in the Messianic Age: Amos 9:13, Jl 2:19 ff. and 4:18, Is 4:2, Jer 31:12, Ez 34:27 and 36:29 f. This notion took on quite fantastic proportions in later Jewish literature.

³⁰ Jeremias, p. 18.

“the Greek version of the parable in Mk stands near to an Aramaic original.”³¹ In addition to this, the Sower appears to be an example of pure parable. It relates a simple fact of daily experience with the utmost naturalness and accuracy. One detail alone, the richness of the ultimate yield, is abnormal, and even this is extraordinary rather than miraculous.³² Nothing here suggests an allegory whose details are expressed in a cryptic, metaphorical language which should be interpreted one by one. Rather, this parable is a series of concrete pictures which combine to indicate a single lesson which the hearers could discover by reflecting on the concrete historical situation in which they found themselves.

Nor was discovery of this moral beyond the capacity of the famous “man on the street,” if he only attended to the story. Every element in it, structure, imagery, and the symbolic climax, answered the question which was upsetting Jesus’ hearers: How could He be Messiah, the bringer of the kingdom, if He acted as He did? Just as the Sower, Jesus’ initial lack of success will not prevent His work being ultimately crowned with glory. “The start has been made and nothing can prevent the coming of the kingdom”—this is the fundamental assurance given His hearers by this parable.³³ It is, therefore, fundamentally good tidings, a gospel message. However, the emphasis on present failure cannot be denied—the birds, the rocky ground, and the thorns will not slip from memory. More than in the other parables of growth, Jesus is facing up to the unfavorable aspect of His present ministry. His appeal is failing, the moment of grace for His hearers is quickly slipping by. They must attend, take heed, and believe, for their share in the kingdom is at stake. This parable is, therefore, also an exhortation. From what he knows of the course of Jesus’ activity, the historian can form a fairly accurate idea as to when such a parable would have been spoken. It would fit neither at the beginning nor at the very end of His ministry. Jesus spoke it when the initial enthusiasm had faded away and when some of His hearers walked no more with Him. However, His voice does not have here the tone of bitter regret we hear in His last days. It

³¹ Taylor, p. 254. For details cf. Taylor *in loco* and Jeremiah, pp. 60–61.

³² Schmid, p. 93.

³³ Schnackenburg, p. 103: “Dazu erklärt Jesus: Dennoch ist der Anfang gemacht, und das kommende Reich naht unaufhaltsam. . . . Gott führt sein Werk auch unter diesen Umständen zu Ende.”

seemed as if the divine plan of salvation might permit the falling away of many, but there was still hope, so Jesus raised His voice in warning and in promise. The point of time indicated here is, therefore, well on in Jesus' ministry. As to the place where the parable was spoken, nothing that we know about Jesus' way of preaching, nor even the time element suggested by the message, would cause the historian to dispute the testimony of all three Evangelists that the parable was spoken in Galilee. Therefore, he inclines to date the parable as thus interpreted towards the close of the ministry in Galilee.³⁴

However, this is not all which the Gospels offer about the parable of the Sower. In each of the three Synoptics an interpretation is appended which is attributed to Jesus Himself. Here is an element which calls for careful assessment, for its preservation shows that it possessed importance for the Early Church. The first impression made on the historian when he studies this application is that its general sense is different from that which he had derived from the Sower in the light of the other parables of growth. The interpretation does not speak of the kingdom but of Jesus' word. Moreover, its message is this: just as the harvest yield depends on the fertility of the ground in which the seed is placed, so too the effect of Jesus' word is proportioned to the dispositions of His hearers.³⁵ Of course, the interpretation, like the parable, is more than a piece of simple exposition. It, too, is a warning: the disciple must not be content with having heard the word of the Master; he must assimilate it and make it a principle of practical living. Secondly, the manner in which this message is conveyed by the interpretation surprises the historian who has studied the parable. Jesus explains the parable as if it were an allegory, taking each individual phrase and giving its explanation. Moreover, the historian is astonished by the clumsiness of expression here. Jesus explains that the classes of listeners resemble the *seeds* which fall on the various parts of the field, whereas He clearly means that they were like the different kinds of *soil* in which the seed had been placed.³⁶ In addition, he wonders why Jesus places no stress in His interpretation on the final details of the story. The threefold yield is mentioned but not developed. As Jesus explains it, the story possesses no climax to speak of, the impression being given

³⁴ For this interpretation and its *Sitz im Leben Jesu*, cf. Schnackenburg p. 103.

³⁵ Schmid, p. 97. ³⁶ *Ibid.*

that the last stage is, if anything, of less importance to the commentator than the earlier ones.³⁷ Finally, the difference in vocabulary between parable and interpretation arouses the historian's interest. Parallels to the words and expressions used here are not to be found in the Gospel texts which have been judged on intrinsic grounds to approximate the *ipsissimae voces Jesu*, but in the New Testament epistles which have preserved for us the categories and formulae of the Early Church.³⁸ An additional fact is that this passage, in contrast to the parable, contains no Semitisms nor does it hint in any way that it is "translation Greek." This interpretation, which contrasts in so many ways with the story it sets out to explain, rather than helping the historian to understand the parable, provides him at first sight with a tantalizing problem.

The only means to solve this problem at the disposal of the historian is to relate the contrasting phenomena to his general knowledge of the Synoptic Gospels, the nature of Jesus' Palestinian preaching, and the purpose of the Early Church in forming and preserving traditions about its Master. The Synoptic Evangelists, he is aware, did not compose their works in one relatively continuous effort, as modern authors do, but were content to edit material selected from the mass of testimony about Jesus which had crystallized into fixed form at various points of time in the thirty years which separated Mark from the events he reported.³⁹ As for Jesus' Palestinian preaching, his researches have convinced the historian that it was essentially a heralding of the coming kingdom, which, to be effective, was necessarily conditioned by the concrete historical situation of that ministry. Thirdly, it is evident that the aim of the Early Church was practical rather than scientific. In

³⁷ Taylor, p. 261: "But the climax is not emphasized and developed; the earlier stages have absorbed the commentator's attention. All therefore that he has to say is that the people in question hear the word, welcome it. . . . They are a mere foil to the discreditable types." As will be seen later, however, we disagree heartily with Taylor's conclusion from these observations: "So little is the parable understood!"

³⁸ Jeremias, pp. 40-41.

³⁹ Despite the new emphasis on the activity of the Evangelists in the work of the *Redaktionsgeschichtliche Schule*, Wikenhauser's judgment on the Synoptic Gospels remains true: "die syn Evv sind Sammelwerke" (*Einleitung in das NT* [2nd ed.; Freiburg, 1956] p. 196). Although new evidence has been brought to light to demonstrate the theological interest of these men, the literary activity which expressed this interest was "editorial" rather than "compositional."

forming the gospel tradition, it strove not for precise historical statement but rather to represent truly the entire activity of Jesus in a manner which would also reveal its relevance for its adherents and their contemporaries.⁴⁰ Seen in the light of these considerations, the most reasonable explanation of the contrasting phenomena seems to lie in attributing parable and interpretation to different strata in the developing tradition. As every element about it suggests, the parable belongs to a very early stratum, probably not more than two removes from Jesus Himself. The interpretation, on the other hand, gives evidence of belonging to a later stratum and appears to reflect the vocabulary and above all the *Problematik* of the Early Church rather than that of Jesus' Palestinian ministry.⁴¹

Unlike some of his predecessors, the modern historian will not let the matter rest here. He feels bound to explain plausibly why the Early Church should have so restated this parable that Jesus' word, i.e., the Christian revelation, replaced the kingdom of God as the center of interest, while attention was transferred from the unity between Jesus' ministry and the coming kingdom to the external and internal obstacles which could prevent that revelation obtaining its desired results. He finds that the explanation of this transposition may well have been given in a second pericope, also of later provenance, which immediately precedes this explanation in all three Evangelists.⁴² Here Jesus reveals that He spoke in parables to the crowd in order that the mystery of the kingdom might be preached in a manner consonant with the divine plan of salvation. And this, as Isaiah had made clear, included His own rejection by the Jewish people. In this pericope the Church expressed its awareness of three facts: (1) that "the central message of these

⁴⁰ Cf. reference in n. 2.

⁴¹ The reader should not imagine that the historian proposes this solution without careful consideration of the alternatives. Jeremias, p. 60, has expressed his reluctance as follows: "Ich habe mich lange gegen den Schluss gesträubt, dass diese Gleichnisdeutung der Urkirche zugeschrieben werden muss." The distinction in strata is imposed by the fact that no other hypothesis will reasonably account for the congeries of phenomena which have to be explained: differences in vocabulary and language, difference in problems faced, the employment of allegorization, together with the fact that these phenomena recur in other passages which present further evidence of belonging to a later stratum. The stratum, however, is not very late. The absence of any Marcan peculiarities leads most scholars to date this material before Mark, i.e., before ca. 65 A.D.

⁴² Mk 4:10-12 par. Taylor, p. 254, judges this pericope to be a "Markan construction" on the basis of received tradition.

parables [of growth]" was "the eschatological significance of the earthly ministry of Jesus," (2) that the parables expressed this significance in a "germinal form" which stated "the secret presence of the kingdom in the preaching and healing activity of Jesus," and (3) that it itself understood this truth in a much clearer manner, "in the form of an explicit christology, with its center in the message of the death, resurrection and heavenly enthronement of Christ." As a result of this possession, "the germinal form of this message . . . was to a certain extent superseded and no longer actual; the parables could find new applications."⁴³ This is precisely what the analysis of the interpretation had suggested to the historian; in it the writer was not envisaging the Jewish audience to which Jesus first addressed the parable, but rather the difficulties experienced by His contemporaries in putting into practice what the Christian revelation demanded of them.⁴⁴

The all-important question here, of course, is: Does this transposition falsify the original meaning of the parable? It is hard for the historian to see how it does. Despite the crucial omission of any mention of the kingdom and the changed reference given to the element of extraordinary fertility in the interpretation, the balance between the eschatological and hortatory elements has shifted only slightly from parable to explanation. In both, the hortatory element is implicit and the earnest appeal which the Church makes in the interpretation shows that she speaks with a consciousness of her own eschatological situation. Nor has the Church's interpretation changed the dominant intention which our Lord had in mind when He pronounced the parable. Both parable and interpretation implicitly demand a personal decision from their hearers to change then and there the religious and moral attitudes which they had assumed towards Jesus' person or His word.⁴⁵ In the parable Jesus uttered this challenge: Believe in me. Despite the apparent failure of my mission, I am He who, as my words and acts imply, will establish the kingdom, and only those who are united to me will enter it. In the interpretation, the Church applied His words to the temptations which those who had heard His word must face. Implicit in its exposition was the appeal to its children, Jesus' disciples, to over-

⁴³ Dahl II, p. 158.

⁴⁴ This is particularly true of Mk 4:17b-19; cf. Taylor, p. 261.

⁴⁵ Schnackenburg, p. 104.

come these threats to their salvation and become like those who hear and welcome His word. These only "will yield a harvest, one thirtyfold, one sixtyfold, one a hundredfold" (v. 20). What, then, has the Church effected by this transposition? Jeremias has described the change admirably in treating of a series of interpretations added by the Church to another of Jesus' parables: "Nothing had been added to or taken from [the parable]. The accent has been shifted because of the change in audience."⁴⁶ The shift in interest from the moment when the kingdom of God will come to the present trials faced by the Christians gives the interpretation a timeless quality and a note of personal appeal which makes its mixture of warning and promise fully applicable to any period in the age of the Church. The Church, therefore, has not changed Jesus' message; rather, it has faithfully reproduced it in the exact form in which Jesus spoke it in the last moments of the "old aeon" and applied it for the benefit of her children who must live their lives in the "new age."

His analysis of the interpretation of the Sower is, therefore, far from leading the modern historian to deny historical interest to the Early Church or to accuse it of substituting its own message for that of the Master. The manner in which the Synoptics treated the parable-preaching of Jesus rather induces him to attribute to them a double preoccupation, both of which may be justly termed historical. They clearly wished to reproduce accurately the manner, contents, and effects of Jesus' preaching in Palestine. Equally strong, however, was their desire to explain to their contemporaries why Jesus had chosen this manner of preaching and to show the relevance which that preaching still held for them. This double purpose, to recall and interpret, and to interpret by calling on Jesus' own words wherever possible, seems to explain best the blend of elements which form these chapters. If either aim might be said to predominate, it was that of accurate recall. This was the reason why Mark carefully informed his readers that Jesus had preached to the Jews mainly in parables, which neither they nor the disciples understood, a fact which led Jesus to instruct the latter specially, because of their providential role. It was surely to preserve the memory of what Jesus had actually said that Mark selected from early

⁴⁶ Jeremias, p. 33. These words were written in commentary on Lk 16: 8-13, which contains a series of applications appended to the parable of the Unjust Steward.

tradition three model parables, to which Matthew added others in his turn. Yet both Evangelists felt that accurate reproduction was not sufficient to ensure full appreciation of the message of the Master. So they cited His own words to explain why He spoke as He had—that the divine plan might be fulfilled—and by so doing communicated their realization that, although adapted to the mentality of the Jews, this manner of preaching was an approximation rather than the full, clear statement of what Jesus wished to convey. Therefore, it could only be temporary.⁴⁷ In addition, because Jesus had necessarily spoken this parable in a way conditioned by the particular historical situation in which He then stood, and precisely because they had reproduced “this germinal form” of His message as exactly as they could, the Evangelists were eager to show their readers that this parable still possessed relevance for them, despite the fact that the “mystery of the kingdom” had been revealed to them. So they took advantage of a fact which they had to report, namely, that during His public life Jesus frequently explained His parables to His disciples, and used it to insert a traditional interpretation which was in accord with the intentions of the Lord and yet pointed His message so that it applied to the conditions of their own, very different age. The modern historian does not find anything in this procedure which he would term “unhistorical,” prepared as he is to allow the Evangelists within limits to establish their own norms for historical writing, instead of imposing on them those of his own time and place.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Mk 4:21–22; cf. Schmid, p. 101.

⁴⁸ The limits referred to above exclude any statement which would disrupt the essential conformity which must exist between the past event and its historical record. The nature of the Gospels forces us to expect this from the Evangelists. The problem here, however, is: Does the adaptation of Jesus' words to another audience destroy this essential conformity? Fridrichsen answers in the negative (*art. cit.*, p. 39) and explains how this is so: “Jesus' teaching, His Sermon on the Mount, and His parables belong to His activity among God's people of old times, *in the last days of the ancient era*. Formally and objectively they bear the stamp of that activity, and of its special purpose in preparing the congregation of the Jewish Synagogue for the Kingdom of God. *But, at the same time, they bear the new age within them*. Therefore it has been possible for them to be adapted by the Church, and in the light of the Resurrection, and the fellowship of the Spirit, to become the Word of the Lord to His redeemed people” (emphasis added). Therefore, by adapting Jesus' words to her children, the Early Church not only fulfilled a practical, apostolic purpose. By this very procedure she reflected an aspect of the historical actuality of Jesus of Nazareth which would have been overlooked, had she merely reproduced His words exactly as He had spoken them.

EXEGETE AND PREACHER

Let us return finally to the preacher, for it may appear that we have forgotten him entirely. This is not so, for one of his major preoccupations about modern exegetical developments has governed the construction of this entire paper. It has tried to state concretely the reasons why the exegete today willingly admits that the Gospels are not "pure" historical sources. He does so, first, because the research of more than half a century has shown that the attempt to qualify the Gospels in this way is chimerical, since all efforts to do so have resulted ironically in establishing that the Gospels and the tradition from which they sprang were composed "from faith to faith."⁴⁹ Secondly, the exegete makes his admission without regret, because he believes that research has shown that such sources are not an essential requisite for writing authentic history, and that the dichotomy between what "the Church believed took place" and what "actually happened" is not as irreducible as many have believed. He feels that his own experience and that of his fellows has shown that the gospel tradition composed in faith is a valuable source for history and that, subjected to methodical analysis, it can lead the investigator to accurate conclusions concerning what Jesus actually did and really was. Therefore, it seems to him that the basic reason for the preacher's concern, that denial of the "pure" historicity of the Gospels involves the admission that history cannot provide a basis for the prudent acceptance in faith of Jesus as our Redeemer and Lord, is being resolved *ambulando*.

Nevertheless, the exegete is fully aware that the historical reconstruction of the life of Jesus on the basis of the gospel tradition is not easy. He is certain, besides, that he and his fellows have not completed this task. A start, however, has been made. It has been demonstrated that the canonical Gospels, *in globo*, reproduce authentic tradition. This is important in that it permits a presupposition that what the tradition alleges to have happened actually did so, though the fact in a particular instance may not have been established with historical rigor. But what

⁴⁹ The mentality of the Evangelists has rarely been better described than in these words of Fridrichsen (*art. cit.*, p. 43): "Faith builds upon history and includes it, but associates it with the present, and aspires to the future consummation." The idea is not new. Thomas Aquinas was driven to join the same ideas together in pondering the evangelical accounts of the Last Supper: cf. "O sacrum convivium."

has yet to be done is more important. This is to determine the exact historical data which can be drawn from each of the multitude of pericopes which the Gospels contain and to correlate this data. Moreover, the nature of the tradition, as revealed by his research, has made the exegete aware of the fact that, even when this task shall be complete, many lacunae will remain which he should like to be able to fill. He regrets this fact, but it seems to him insignificant in view of the many advantages which his new vision has given him. For this has enlarged immeasurably the material on which he can legitimately draw to construct his image of Jesus. No longer restricted to the Synoptics, nor to the earliest strata of their tradition, he can subject the entire sweep of the gospel tradition to his research. And he is more than willing to communicate the results of this research to the preacher as his work progresses.⁵⁰ For he knows that in this, even more than in past ages, his work is an essential prerequisite for the fruitful preaching of the word of Christ. But that it may be this, the exegete is aware that the preacher must trust him, his purpose, his dedication, and his skills. He is not surprised, to be sure, that at the present moment this trust may be lacking in some quarters, for he recalls that Pius XII had foreseen this.⁵¹ His hope, however, is that his unfinished work may not be rejected unexamined in the name of principles of doubtful value. It seems to him that the injunction of St. Paul is as relevant today to the exegesis of the Gospels as it was to first-century prophecy: "Omnia probate," the Apostle advised, "quod bonum est, tenete." And for the exegete, the Pauline "omnia" includes not only his own work but also the "principles" which we all have received from an age which has passed away.

⁵⁰ One excellent way by which the English-speaking preacher can keep in contact with exegetical work is to consult regularly *New Testament Abstracts*, published at Weston College, Weston, Mass.

⁵¹ As seems clear from the counsel of the Holy Father that other Christians should judge the work of exegetes not only "aequo justoque animo," but also "summa caritate" (*EB* 564).