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# The Posture of the Interpreter

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EDITORIAL NOTE: This paper was read to an international conference of Lutheran theologians which met at Concordia College, Oakland, Calif., in June 1959. The general theme of the conference was: "Our Fellowship Under Scripture."

PRACTICALLY everybody in Christendom claims to be in some sense under Scripture. The Liberal feels that he is being "true to the deepest intentions" of Jesus or of Paul when he treats Scripture in his own fashion. Bultmann claims to be dealing so radically with the form of the New Testament message merely in order to confront modern man with what he considers the essential content of the New Testament message. And certainly the Fundamentalist, for all his frequent failure to make the most basic and radical distinction that the Bible itself knows, the distinction between Law and Gospel, interprets his Bible in the conviction that he is putting himself under Scripture.

The matter is obviously not a simple one. How can the interpreter in the church assure himself and the church that he is really working in obedience to the inscripturated Word of God? Von Hofmann has pointed out<sup>1</sup> that in the history of interpretation most of the aberrations from sound exegesis stemmed not from ignorance of proper hermeneutical principles but from a false attitude toward Scripture which led men to believe that these principles could not or did not need to be applied to it.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Chr. K. von Hofmann, *Biblische Hermeneutik* (Nördlingen: C. H. Beck'sche Buchhandlung, 1880), pp. 24 ff.

The way toward being under Scripture begins, then, not with an examination of exegetical techniques but with a consideration of exegetical attitude. This paper, therefore, purposes to inquire not into the skills of interpretation but into the basic attitude of the interpreter of Scripture, the attitude which will dictate how skills are to be employed and techniques are to be applied. For this the term "posture" has been employed. As a workman's posture is imposed upon him by the nature of his materials and the nature of his work, so the interpreter's posture is dictated by the nature of Sacred Scripture and by his function as interpreter of Sacred Scripture.

The culmination of God's revelation is the incarnation, and the incarnation is the interpretive center of all divine revelation. Our point of contact with the incarnation is the apostolate, and our present point of contact with the apostolate is the apostolic Word of the New Testament. We may, therefore, describe the function of the interpreter in terms of that *mimesis*<sup>2</sup> of the apostle (and of the apostle's Lord) which Paul requires of the church. (2 Thess. 3: 6-12; Phil. 3:17; 1 Cor. 4:14-17; 1 Cor. 11:1; 1 Thess. 1:6-8)

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<sup>2</sup> Since the English word "imitation" does not fully convey the meaning of the Greek word it literally reproduces, the Greek word *mimesis* is used throughout this discussion. Only a select number of passages involving the idea of *mimesis* will be treated here; for a full treatment of the New Testament word group see Wilhelm Michaelis' article in *Th. W.* IV, 661-678, to which I am indebted in the following section.

## "Mimesis" and Interpretation

In all five of the passages cited above *mimesis* involves interpretation, that is, an inner appropriation of the apostle's Word. In 2 Thess. 3:6-12 the church is called upon to understand and to translate into appropriate action the commandments of the apostle (vv. 6, 10) and to comprehend and to act in accordance with the tradition which it has received from him (v. 6), a tradition which his own conduct among them has exemplified (vv. 8, 9). On the basis of this interpretation of his words the members of the church are to become "imitators" of him. Likewise in Phil. 3:17 the *mimesis* to which the Philippians are summoned is no blind following in Paul's footsteps; it involves an inner appropriation of the apostolic word in which he proclaims the nature of a genuinely Christian life (3:4-14) over against the aberrations and distortions of both legalist (3:2-5) and libertine (3:18, 19). When Paul appeals to the Corinthians to imitate him by turning from the intoxication of a theology of glory to the sobriety and suffering of a theology of the cross (1 Cor. 4:14-17), he is asking them to understand and to appropriate his words to them; he is asking them to interpret afresh the Gospel, by which he begot them (v. 15), to understand and heed the admonition which he is writing to them (v. 16), and to give ear to the reminder of his teaching (his "ways in Christ Jesus") which Timothy will bring to them. (V. 16)

In 1 Cor. 11:1 Paul concludes his long discourse (chs. 8—10) on the consideration which Christians owe to a weak brother's conscience with the appeal, "Become *imitators* of me." The *mimesis* which he calls

for obviously involves the understanding and the appropriating of all that he has said in the preceding three chapters. In the *mimesis* spoken of in 1 Thess. 1:6-8 the interpretive act is particularly prominent. The Thessalonians became imitators of Paul and of the Lord in "accepting" the Word, and this "accepting" is an inner appropriation and assimilation of the Word. As Grundmann points out, δέχεσθαι is a way of describing the act of faith.<sup>3</sup> So thoroughly did they appropriate the apostolic Word that they could transmit it faithfully; the Word that sounded forth from them was nothing less than "the Word of the Lord." (V. 8)

*Mimesis* is broader than what we commonly call interpretation. Any act of faith, done in believing obedience to the apostle and the apostle's Lord, may be called *mimesis*. But since each such act is *mimesis* by virtue of the fact that the apostolic Word is inwardly appropriated, every such act involves interpretation. And the interpretation of the apostolic Word is already a part of the *mimesis*, not merely a preparation for it. Or to put it differently, all *mimesis* is a being caught up into the apostolic impetus of a life lived under the Lordship of Jesus Christ; the means and dynamic of this "being caught up" is the believing apprehension of the apostolic Word. *Mimesis* is therefore, it would seem, a natural and suitable term for the task of the interpreter, and a consideration of this *mimesis* holds promise of being helpful in determining what the posture of the interpreter should be.

<sup>3</sup> " . . . eine Umschreibung des Glaubensbegriffes," *Th. W.* II, 53.

This act of *mimesis* includes two elements: (a) the recognition of apostolic authority and submission to it; and (b) the continuation of the apostolic task. When Paul speaks to the Thessalonians regarding the idle and disorderly enthusiasts among them, his words are markedly authoritative (2 Thess. 3:6-12). He asserts his authority even when pointing to his refusal to exploit that authority for his own advantage (v. 9). He recalls the "tradition" which the Thessalonian church had received from him (v. 6), and "tradition" is for Paul, the former rabbinical student, an authoritarian conception.<sup>4</sup> He gives commands (vv. 6, 10, 12), and he prescribes a penalty for disobedience to his instructions (2 Thess. 3:14, 15). *Mimesis* is submission to apostolic authority, and it includes the continuation of the apostolic task, the carrying on of the apostolic impetus. The conduct of the idle and disorderly is to be shaped by the apostolic example as interpreted by the apostolic Word, and the church gets its norms for dealing with the disorderly from the apostolic Word.

In Phil. 3:17 Paul is pitting his authority against that of Judaizers (Phil. 3:2) and that of the "enemies of the cross of Christ" (Phil. 3:18, 19). Of these two groups the Judaizers certainly claimed authority over the church, and the same may be said of the "enemies of the cross" also, especially if we follow Schlatter's very plausible suggestion<sup>5</sup> that Paul is referring to the arrogantly authoritarian pneumatics of Corinth. Paul centers his authority, as always, wholly in Christ (Phil. 3:7-14). The second ele-

ment in the *mimesis*, the continuation of the apostolic task, appears with peculiar clarity here. The Philippians are being called upon to "walk" as the apostle walks (Phil. 3:17), to "stand" where he stands (Phil. 4:1). But beyond that Paul points not only to himself but also to other men who "walk thus" and are therefore objects of *mimesis*. The apostle has initiated a rhythm which continues and is to be continued: believing and obedient men, through their *mimesis* of the apostle, have become, in turn, objects of the *mimesis* of the church.

In 1 Cor. 4:14-17 Paul calls himself the father of the Corinthian Christians as one who has begotten them in Christ Jesus through the Gospel. The father is a figure of authority. And Timothy is being sent to Corinth to remind the Corinthian church of Paul's "ways in Christ," the teaching which is authoritative and shapes the life of all the churches. The father-children figure also implies the other element in *mimesis*, the continuation of the apostolic task; the child not only owes its origin to the father, the child lives with the father in a communion of will and activity.<sup>6</sup> Paul's Corinthian children are being summoned to live and work under the cross, with its nay to human wisdom and pride, as their father Paul lives and works under the cross.

In 1 Cor. 11:1 and 1 Thess. 1:6 the element of authority in *mimesis* is especially strong, for here Paul bases the *mimesis* which he asks of the church on his own *mimesis* of Christ; and it is clear that Paul does not "imitate" or "emulate" Christ —

<sup>4</sup> See Büchsel, *Tb. W.* II, 175.

<sup>5</sup> *Paulus der Bote Jesu* (Stuttgart: Calwer-vereinsbuchhandlung, 1939), p. 51.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Jesus' use of the father-child image, Matt. 5:44, 45.

he obeys Him as his Lord.<sup>7</sup> In both cases the second element, the continuation of the apostolic task, is also apparent. The Corinthian church is being called upon to become a genuinely "apostolic" and Christian church, a church bent on the salvation of men, not on religious self-fulfillment. The Thessalonian church has evinced itself as a genuinely "apostolic" church both by receiving the Word with joy and by transmitting it energetically.

The words denoting "imitation" are not very frequent in Paul or in the New Testament generally, but the thought occurs again and again. We shall confine ourselves to Paul and shall be selective even within that limitation. It is instructive to note what kind of imitation Paul does *not* want. He does not want men to attach themselves to his person; it is not his mission as apostle of Jesus Christ to create Paulinists (1 Cor. 1:12). Much as he values his peculiar gift of celibacy, he does not call for a blanket imitation of it. Rather he calls on each man to serve God with the *charisma* which God has given that man (1 Cor. 7:7). Paul does not expect the weak in faith to imitate his own strong faith. Rather he deprecates any attempt to force any such *mimesis* upon the weak in faith. (Rom. 14, 15; 1 Cor. 8)

Paul does expect the men of the church to become "fools" as he is a "fool" (1 Cor. 3:18, 19; 4:10, 16). He expects the church to pass judgment on the offending brother as he has already passed judgment (1 Cor. 5:3, 4, 13). He expects the men of the church to use their gifts, not for display

but for the edification of the whole church, as he, Paul, uses his gifts (1 Cor. 14:18-20). His confrontation with the risen Lord made a worker of Paul (1 Cor. 15:10); his apostolic proclamation of the risen Lord is to make the Christians of Corinth workers (1 Cor. 15:58).<sup>8</sup> He bids the church rejoice with his own apostolic Gospel-centered rejoicing (Phil. 2:17, 18). Under the apostolic Word the church of Corinth is to become so "apostolic" in dealing effectively with the misleaders of the church that the person of the apostle becomes, as it were, expendable; the apostle as person is to become *ἄδόκιμος* because the apostolic Word has created men in the likeness of the apostle. (2 Cor. 13)

The apostle speaks the authoritative word concerning the dead in Christ (1 Thess. 4:13-17), a word which is essentially a word of the Lord (v. 15); the church is expected not merely to receive that word in obedient recognition of apostolic authority—the word is to live and work on from mouth to mouth, from man to man (1 Thess. 4:13-17). The apostolic word concerning the times and seasons of the Lord's return (1 Thess. 5:1-10) is to continue *per mutuum colloquium et consolationem fratrum* (1 Thess. 5:11). In the Letter to the Colossians this *mimesis* is spelled out word for word: The apostle *proclaims Christ, admonishing and teaching* every man in *all wisdom* (Col. 1:27, 28); in the edifying converse of the church the *Word of Christ* is to dwell richly; in word and song the brethren are to *teach and admonish* one another in *all wisdom* (Col. 3:16). It can hardly be accidental that Paul speaks of himself as *called* apostle and

<sup>7</sup> Eph. 5:1 drastically points up the element of submission to authority in *mimesis*; here the churches are called upon to "imitate" God Himself.

<sup>8</sup> Note the verbal echo, *ἐκποίησα* (v. 10), *κόποις* (v. 58).

of the church as *called* saints in just two letters, the Letter to the Romans and the First Letter to the Corinthians (Rom. 1: 1, 7; 1 Cor. 1:1, 2). In both these letters the summons to *mimesis* is very pronounced. The Roman saints are to be caught up in the apostolic missionary impetus under the power of the Gospel, which the apostle proclaims; the saints of Corinth are to be caught up in the apostolic impetus of a life lived wholly to the Crucified, with all the abnegation of human pride and self-assertion which such a life involves.

*Mimesis* of the apostle, in the New Testament sense, involves both the obedient recognition of apostolic authority on the part of those who are interpreting the apostolic Word and the will to continue the apostolic task under the power of the apostolic Word. Any interpretation of the apostolic Word in the apostolic church will therefore have to be determined by these twin impulses if it is to be legitimate interpretation, that is, if it would claim to interpret the apostolic Word on its own terms.

#### I. THE *Mimesis* OF THE INTERPRETER AS RECOGNITION OF APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY

The interpreter's recognition of apostolic authority is, first, a recognition of the fact that the apostolate is the creation of the grace of God in Christ. This is spelled out unmistakably both in the history of the Twelve and in the history of Paul. The calling of the first four disciples, destined to be apostles (Matt. 4:18-22), is the first item under the rubric. "The kingdom of the heavens is at hand" (Matt. 4:17). "Kingdom of the heavens" is, by Jesus' own definition, pure grace: royal largesse

to beggars, comfort to mourners, the gift of God's new world to the meek who look with serene confidence to God, the free bestowal of righteousness upon men who hunger and thirst for it and must needs die without it (Matt. 5:3-6). The calling of Matthew the publican to discipleship and to the apostolate (Matt. 9:9) is so purely gracious that it is an offense to the "righteous" (Matt. 9:10-13). "Freely ye have received," Jesus tells the Twelve (Matt. 10:8). Paul cannot speak of his apostolate without speaking of the grace of God. His apostolate has its origin solely in that grace (Rom. 1:5; Gal. 1:13-16; Eph. 3:2-11) and is sustained by that grace. "By the grace of God I *am* what I am." (1 Cor. 15:9)

The absolute, divine character of this grace is seen in the fact that it comes to the apostles as to judged and doomed men. The Twelve came to Jesus with the Baptist's proclamation still ringing in their ears. They had heard him pronounce the threat of God's wrath upon the priestly nobility and upon the pietists of their people; they had heard the Baptist pronounce the doom of God's wrath upon man as man ("offspring of vipers"), a doom from which the mere fact of their descent from Abraham could not shield them (Matt. 3:9). Matthew describes the coming of the Kingdom in the person of Jesus as the light of God's new creation breaking upon a doomed and hopeless people "sitting in darkness . . . in the land and shadow of death" (Matt. 4:16). And the story of the Passion is the apostles' *confiteor*; they had all, by their flight and dereliction, denied the Christ before men and could in justice look for nothing but that the Christ would deny them before His Father (Matt. 10:33). It was absolute

and incredible grace that He should, instead, call them His disciples and His brethren and send them out to make disciples of all nations. (Matt. 28:7, 10, 19, 20)

For Paul, above all men, the apostolate was pure, incredible grace. He calls his coming into the apostolate a violent and unnatural birth, against nature (1 Cor. 15:8). He knew himself to be one of God's Onesimi, a runaway slave who deserved punishment, for he had persecuted the church of God (1 Cor. 15:9). For him, too, the call to the apostolate was the miracle of God's creative light shining, uncaused, out of darkness. (2 Cor. 4:6)

If the apostolate is the creation of God's grace in Christ, it is also the vehicle of that grace. "Freely give" is Jesus' word to the Twelve, who have received freely (Matt. 10:8). Paul becomes the Lord's chosen vessel to bear His name abroad, that only name by which men must be saved (Acts 9:15; cf. Gal. 1:15, 16). The authority of the apostle is therefore authority freely given, conferred authority, and it remains essentially Messianic authority. Jesus *makes* His disciples fishers of men (Matt. 4:19); He *gives* the Twelve authority (Matt. 10:1); He *gives* His apostle the keys of the Kingdom (Matt. 16:19). Thus their presence is the presence of the Christ of God; whosoever receives them receives the compassionate Shepherd of Israel and receives the God who sent Him (Matt. 10:40). Paul can boast only of the authority which the Lord has *given* him (2 Cor. 10:8); because authority has been *given* the apostle, the Christ speaks in him (2 Cor. 13:3) and works through him. (Rom. 15:18)

The apostles represent and present the Christ; in them and through them men are

confronted with the ultimate Word of God. No man can attain to that; it is the recreative grace of God that makes them vehicles of revelation. The Spirit is bestowed on them, and thus, and only thus, do they become mediators of divine revelation.<sup>9</sup> The interpreter, in recognizing apostolic authority, remains aware of this. In the apostolic writings he is dealing not with the works of religious geniuses who have achieved breath-taking religious insights, but with the words of doomed, forgiven, and inspired men, men in whose hearts the creative grace of God has shined to enable them to bring to the world the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.<sup>10</sup>

### *The "Wunderbar"*

#### *Character of the Apostolic Word*

The interpreter's recognition of apostolic authority is therefore a recognition of the "wunderbar" character of the apostolic Word, using the word "wunderbar" in the sense which Von Hofmann gave it in his *Biblische Hermeneutik*,<sup>11</sup> a sense not really adequately reproduced by "miraculous." One might describe it thus: "Wunderbar" describes that gracious intervention of God

<sup>9</sup> Since the gift of the Spirit will be further discussed below, a mere citation of some of the principal passages may suffice here: Luke 24: 48, 49; Acts 1:4, 8; 2; John 14:16, 17; 25, 26; 16:7-15; 20:21-23.

<sup>10</sup> The first four chapters of the *First Letter* to the Corinthians alone ought to have banished the term "religious genius" from our theological vocabulary.

<sup>11</sup> "Alles Geschehen und alles geschichtliches Erzeugnis, welches Verwirklichung des wesentlichen Willens Gottes ist, nennen wir wunderbar, weil in Widerstreit stehend mit der natürlichen Entwicklung des menschlichen Wesens, also alle Heilsgeschichte und deren Erzeugnis" (p. 35).

which transcends all the possibilities of human historical development and can therefore reverse the fatal cadence of fallen man's thinking, willing, and doing and can rescue man from fallen man's doom.

Proksch in his *Theologie des Alten Testaments* has correctly oriented a theological consideration of the miracle and the miraculous by subsuming the miracle under the larger theme of creation.<sup>12</sup> He associates the miracle in this context of creation not only with the creative act of God (אֱלֹהִים) but also with the Spirit and the Word of God.<sup>13</sup> We can take the full measure of what is meant by "wunderbar" only when we consider God the Creator of the world and the God who does wonders and the God whose Spirit is the decisively creative force in all that happens in all history and the God whose Word endures and does its appointed work when all flesh fails and dies. All these elements (creation, miracle, Spirit, Word) are present in the existence of the apostles of Jesus Christ and mark them and their words as "wunderbar."

The apostolate is a creation of God, and the apostolic Word mediates God's new creation. Jesus "made" the Twelve (Mark 3:14). Mark uses the same word for the appointment of the Twelve that the Sep-

tuagint uses in the first verse of Genesis. The risen Christ breathed upon them (John 20:22). John here uses the word that is used in Gen. 2:7 to describe the imparting of the breath of life to Adam. Paul likens his call to the apostolate to the *Fiat lux* of the first creation and knows himself to be not only the recipient but also the transmitter of that light. (2 Cor. 4:6)

God is the God who does wonders; His anointed King is the "wonderful" Counselor (Is. 9:5), and the incarnate Son is attested to men by mighty deeds and wonders and signs (Acts 2:22). The same nimbus of wondrousness is about the apostle; he does the wondrous deeds that are an enacted proclamation of the presence and power of the kingdom of God (Matt. 10:8). The Christ works through him "in the power of signs and wonders" (Rom. 15:18). God attests him with signs and wonders and manifold mighty deeds (Heb. 2:4). Where the apostle does his church-creating work, the signs of the apostle are wrought. (2 Cor. 12:12)

"Thou sendest forth Thy Spirit; they are created" (Ps. 104:30). The Spirit of God is present at the first creation, moving in creative energy over the waters (Gen. 1:2); the Spirit of God is in the people of God (Is. 63:10 ff.); the Spirit is upon the Messiah (Is. 11:1 ff.) and on the Servant of God (Is. 42:1; 61:1; Luke 4:16 ff.). And the Spirit is in the apostles. They have received the Spirit (John 20:21, 22; Acts 2:4) in fulfillment of the promises of their Lord (John 14:16, 17; 25, 26; 16:7-15; Acts 1:4, 8); and they bestow the Spirit (Acts 2:38; 8:15-17; 19:6; Gal. 3:2). Their ministry is a ministry of the Spirit. (2 Cor. 3:6, 8)

The Word of God is a wondrous power;

<sup>12</sup> *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Guetersloh: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 1950), pp. 474, 475.

<sup>13</sup> A fifth member of Proksch's creation complex, the wisdom of God, has not been utilized in this discussion, although it, too, could be documented in the New Testament proclamation of the Christ (Matt. 11:19; 1 Cor. 1:24, 30; Col. 2:3; Apoc. 5:12), in the words of the apostles (Luke 21:15; 1 Cor. 2:6, 7; Col. 1:28), and in the descriptions of the apostolic church (Acts 6:3, 10; 1 Cor. 12:8; Eph. 1:8, 17; 3:10; Col. 1:9; 3:16; 4:5; James 1:5; 3:13-18).



by it the heavens were made (Ps. 33:8,9); by it man lives (Deut. 8:3). It endures when all flesh withers as the grass and dies (Is. 40:6-8), and it surely carries out the purposes of God (Is. 55:10, 11). The Word of the apostles confronts men with the kingdom of God and spells "peace" or "judgment" according as men accept it or reject it (Matt. 10:7-15). The miracle of Pentecost, which sets them to work in Jerusalem and in the wide world, is a miracle of tongues, a gift of language from on high (Acts 2). Their word is henceforth the working Word of God (1 Thess. 2:13). Their Gospel is not a human production (Gal. 1:11) but the power of God Himself for the deliverance of men (Rom. 1:16), with all the inescapable energy of divine grace and divine judgment in it. (2 Cor. 2:15 f.)

All that asserts God's sovereign freedom in His relationship to the world and man (His unique creative power, His miracles, His Spirit, His Word), all these are present in the apostolate. The apostle is "wunderbar," an embodiment of God's wondrous and gracious countermovement against man's sin and doom. The apostle is not of this world; he is so different from the world that the world must needs hate him (John 17:14; 15:18, 19). It is with the apostles' Word, their wondrous Word, that the interpreter has to do.

For all their wondrousness the apostles have no halos; they appear in history in the form of the servant. The sending of the Twelve confronts men with the kingdom of God, which is transcendently "wunderbar." And yet Jesus sends them out as sheep in the midst of wolves (Matt. 10:16). As such — exposed and defenseless, going against the grain of the world,

as sure of incurring contradiction as was their Lord — as such they are the vehicles of the Kingdom (Matt. 10:7), the bringers of peace or judgment upon men (Matt. 10:13, 15); as such they speak a Spirit-wrought Word (Matt. 10:19, 20); as such they are the very presence of the Christ of God (Matt. 10:40). This servant's form conceals the wondrousness of the apostolate; but it also, and primarily, reveals it, for the divine strength is made perfect in their human weakness. What is now hidden in the lowliness of the apostolic mission shall with divine inevitability be revealed (Matt. 10:26). Therefore Paul "boasts" in his weakness and his sufferings, for he sees in them the power of the God who works by contrarieties (2 Cor. 1:9) and experiences in them the indwelling power of the Christ (2 Cor. 12:9, 10). Just because his apostolic Word is not a word made strong by the devices of human art, he knows that the power of God is in it (1 Cor. 2:3-5). Just because he knows his Word to be innocent of rhetoric, he knows that it is a potent Word, a Spirit-taught vehicle of revelation. (1 Cor. 2:10-13)

### *The Historical Character of the Apostolic Word*

God characteristically manifests Himself in history in the form of the servant. He chooses the least of all peoples as recipients and vehicles of His revelation. He is heard not in the earthquake but in the still small voice. The final coming of His kingdom is likened to the rolling of a "stone not made with hands," unimpressive in comparison with the fearful splendor of the great colossus that represents the kingdoms of this world. His anointed

King appears as a shoot from the stump of Jesse—he comes from the judged and ruined house of David—and does his work as the Servant-Messiah, and the apostles who speak His Word appear in history as the world's scrapings and rinsings. God enters, really enters, into the inglorious history of fallen man.

The essential counterpart to the recognition of the "wunderbar" character of the apostolic word is, therefore, the recognition of its historical character. The interpreter recognizes the historical uniqueness of the apostolate. The Christ appears with historical uniqueness at a certain time and place, born in Bethlehem under Augustus and dying in Jerusalem under Pontius Pilate. His apostles share in that historical uniqueness. They stand at a certain date on a mountain in the regions of Caesarea Philippi and confess Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ, the Son of the living God. That confession has about it the wondrousness of a divine act. It rests on what their fathers did not give them, what flesh and blood could not give them; it rests on the revelation of the Father in heaven. But this revelation is not a religious abstraction divorced from history; this revelation is given in history. The disciples confess Jesus as "the Son of the living God," as the living, reacting, acting Son of the living, reacting, and acting God; their confession has its root and basis in a history which they have witnessed. It has been given them to see in the words and deeds of the Servant-Messiah, in the contradicted Christ, who must endure the blasphemy of men, the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God.

The corollary to the recognition of the historical uniqueness of the apostolate is

the recognition of the witness character of the apostolic Word: "You shall be witnesses of Me" (Acts 1:8). The apostles are witnesses! They are witnesses to acts of God, to facts in history, and these acts and facts constitute the revelation of God. This comes out clearly in the words of Paul just when he is speaking of the most incredible fact of all, the crucially significant fact, the fact of the resurrection. If the fact is not fact, if God has not acted, there is no revelation. The apostolic proclamation is empty, and the faith of the church has lost its content and is vain (1 Cor. 15:14, 17). The apostles are no apostles but false witnesses against God if they attribute to God an act in history which He has not performed (1 Cor. 15:15). They are not harmlessly deluded men; they stand exposed as impious men and as blasphemers of God. The task of the interpreter is therefore not a search for a spiritual reality behind and beyond the historical reality communicated by the word of human witnesses, but the apprehension of the reality, witnessed and attested by men with eyes illumined by the Spirit in words taught by the Spirit, given in the historically conditioned Word in its witness to the historical mighty acts of God. Apostolic theology is essentially a theology of recital.

The interpreter therefore recognizes the historically conditioned human Word as the fit and adequate vehicle of divine revelation; the same condescending grace of God which enters human history also uses the plain human Word for the witness to, and the interpretation of, that entry into history (1 Cor. 2:1). That the human Word is the fit and adequate vehicle of God's revelation is seen most simply in the fact that men are responsible before it. It

saves them, or it dooms them, and the doom is their guilt. "Your blood be upon your heads" (Acts 18:6; cf. 20:26). The modern notion that any human word is necessarily a distortion of the divine revelation which it mediates is not shared by the apostles and prophets.

*The Interpenetration of the "Wunderbar" and the Historical*

The "wunderbar" countermovement of God, His gracious "nevertheless" over against the failure of man's history, is not a casual or intermittent intrusion into history but is woven into the texture of history, so that miracle and "naked history" interpenetrate. The uniquely creative act of God stands not only at the beginning of the world and of history, when God creates the world, life, and man (Gen. 1:1, 21, 27). It runs through history and calls into being His chosen people (Is. 43:1, 15), sons and daughters who are called by His name (Is. 43:7). The God who created heaven and earth creates the new age which dawns with the advent of the liberator of Israel, Cyrus (Is. 48:6, 7). He creates the clean heart (Ps. 51:12). His Messianic salvation breaks upon His people like a new first day (Is. 9:2; Matt. 4:16). The light of the new creation irradiates the heart of the apostle (2 Cor. 4:6), and the apostolic Word of reconciliation creates new men in Christ. (2 Cor. 5:17)

The miraculous, which only the omnipotence of God can produce, is not, in the Biblical view of it, confined to the miracles that stand out in high relief from the surface of normal history. God's intricate and hidden ways in guiding history are in themselves a miracle (Is. 28:29; 29:14), inaccessible to the probing mind of man.

God's anointed King, who is to sit on David's throne in history, is a Miracle-Counselor (Is. 9:5). The life of the incarnate Son of God bears a strangely double aspect; it is both the history of a first-century man who could be contradicted and destroyed and the Word of God made flesh, whose manifested Godhead men might see in faith (John 1:14; 12:37-40). The life of the apostles bear this same double aspect (2 Cor. 6:8-10); it is the defamed and contradicted apostle, the apostle who has been humiliated before the face of his church, who points to the miraculous "signs" which he has wrought in Corinth (2 Cor. 12:12); miracle and history are intermeshed and intertwined.

Likewise the wondrous operation of God's Spirit is not limited to primordial creation (Gen. 1:2) or eschatological renewal (Ezek. 36:26, 27; Is. 32:15). The Spirit works in history and through history, the history of a Joshua, a Gideon, or a Saul (Num. 27:18; John 6:34; 1 Sam. 11:6). The Spirit enters the arena where nation contends against nation and "competes" with the men and horses of Egypt (Is. 31:3). In the power of the Spirit the Messiah of the Lord and the servant of the Lord do their work in a real and human history (Is. 11:1-10; Is. 42:1). In the power of the Spirit Jesus of Nazareth enters Israel's history and deals with Israel's agony (Luke 4:14-21). The Spirit comes upon the apostles and the apostolic church and works there in a history open to the eyes of men. "This thing was not done in a corner," Paul tells Agrippa (Acts 26:26). The Spirit separates Paul and Barnabas for their mission to the Gentiles (Acts 13:2) and guides Paul and Silas through Asia to Troas (Acts 16:7). The

Spirit sets elders over the churches of Ephesus (Acts 20:28). And the Spirit binds inspired men to history. The apostles, filled with the Spirit, speak of the mighty deeds of God, speak of Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 2:11, 22); Stephen, full of the Spirit, recites the history of Israel (Acts 7:2-53, 55). According to John, the distinguishing mark of the Spirit of God is that He binds men to history; He confesses Jesus as the Christ "who has come in the flesh"—a theological flight from the Jesus of history is not the work of the Spirit of God. (1 John 4:1-3)

The word of God is the instrument by which the world was made (Ps. 33:6-9); and that Word runs through history, creatively and formatively making history. God's name, God's Law, God's promise, these make the history of Israel and determine the history of the nations. The anointed of the Lord and the Servant of the Lord carry out the Lord's purposes by the Word (Is. 11:4; Is. 50:4, 5, 10). The Messiah in history works by the Word. When He proclaims the great year of jubilee, that gracious year of God begins: "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your ears" (Luke 4:21). His Word remits the sin of man and restores the ruined body of man (Matt. 9:1-8). He drives out demons with a word (Matt. 8:16). He is, in the flesh, as man's human and humane high priest, the Word (John 1:14; Heb. 1:1). And if we would give the Acts of the Apostles a title which Luke himself would sanction, that title would have to be: "The Word of the Lord grew and prevailed" (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20), for that is Luke's own caption over the story of how an obscure sect spread from Jerusalem to Rome.

In the apostolate, as in all the works of God, that which is numinously wonderful and that which is intelligible as "plain history" interpenetrate. The "wunderbar" in the Biblical record of God's revelatory words and deeds asserts God's freedom of creative determination at every point in history. "He hath done whatsoever He hath pleased" holds for every event in history. The interpreter as "imitator" of the apostle is therefore perpetually reminded by the immanent miraculousness of all that takes place under the sun that he must carry on his *mimesis* in the submission of faith, at every point, in the presence of the creatively active power of God, who calls the things that are not into being. On the other hand, the down-to-earth historical character of the mighty deeds of God serves as a perpetual reminder that his faith is not a vague and mystical absorption into the Godhead or an ecstatic intercourse with noble religious ideas but is, rather, relatedness to the concrete, historical redemptive action of God.

The interpreter is not critic; there is no legitimate technique of historical-theological inquiry (and the interpreter of Sacred Scripture is always both historian and theologian) by means of which the interpreter can separate the miraculous from the historical or can penetrate beyond the "wunderbar" into naked history without emptying this history of that which gives it significance. There is no place where the interpreter can stand (if he is acting in *mimesis* of the apostle) and exert critical leverage. The interpreter is aware of the fact that what is involved here is not the *Weltbild* or *Weltanschauung* of the men of the Bible but the theology of the Bible. The question is: Is God shut out from

history, or is He in it, really in it, and free to reveal Himself in it? Is He the First and the Last, or did some nameless prophet merely conceive of Him as First and Last? Is He Lord of history or captive to laws of history? Is He both Creator and Redeemer? Is His grace an absolute grace, sovereignly invading the life of man and the world's history, or is it, after all, in some sort dependent on man? Or to put the question in another form: How seriously do we take the incarnation?<sup>14</sup>

*"Mimesis" and the Authority of the  
Old Testament*

Since the apostolic witness is witness to a history interpreted by the Old Testament, *mimesis* as recognition of apostolic authority necessarily involves a recognition of the Old Testament as the authoritative Word of God. The interpreter sees the Old Testament in apostolic perspective,

<sup>14</sup> L. S. Thornton, in his *Revelation and the Modern World* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1950), p. 16, arrives by quite a different route at a conclusion very similar to the one stated above. He deprecates "any attempt to distinguish the essence of revelation from the sacred literature in which it is enshrined." All such attempts, he says, "involve us in a process of discrimination by which we sit in judgment upon Scripture. . . . It is for the Creator to decide in what manner He will reveal Himself; and God being what He is, the manner of revelation is not a matter upon which man can safely form decisions. . . ."

Ernst Fuchs has called the historical-critical method "die moderne Variante des Traditionsprinzips der altkirchlichen, bzw. mittelalterlichen Bibelauslegung." As the tradition in practice outweighed the authority of Scripture, "so ordnete die historisch-kritische Bibelauslegung die Bibel der Geschichte unter und nahm der Schrift damit das Prädikat ihrer Weltüberlegenheit, die Heiligkeit" (*Hermeneutik* [Bad Canstatt: R. Muellerschoen Verlag, 1958], pp. 159, 160).

that is, from the vantage point of its fulfillment in Jesus. He thus recognizes the continuity and unity of God's speaking in both Testaments, its essential Christocentricity.

This is a large topic, involving a host of problems which cannot be dealt with here. But this much may and must be said: The apostles (and the apostles' Lord), both by their use of the Old Testament and by their explicit utterances concerning it, make it plain where the interpreter whose work is a *mimesis* of the apostles must stand over against the Old Testament Scriptures. Both Jesus and His apostles perceive in this book the voice and will of the God who has in the last days spoken in a Son. Jesus is consciously the Fulfiller of the ancient Word of God, and the apostolic witness to the Christ is unequivocally a witness "according to the Scriptures." Both Jesus and His apostle make it clear also that they are not simply equating the Old Testament with the New Testament Word. The voice of Jesus is not merely another prophetic voice; His is the voice of the Son, who for the last time calls upon God's people to give God what is God's—and dies in delivering that summons (Matt. 21:33-40). Paul says of the Old Testament that it has power to make a man wise unto salvation "*through faith in Christ Jesus*" (1 Tim. 3:15). The Old Testament has its limitation and its abiding validity as Promise, as revelation of the Covenant God in His motion toward the incarnate Christ.

The continuity and unity of God's speaking in both Testaments is for the apostles a given certainty. If modern Old Testament exegesis has rarefied the nexus between the Testaments to the point where

it bears only a shadowy resemblance to that massive and living connection posited by the apostles; if it has made dubious and problematical what is for the apostles certain and axiomatic, the methodological question inevitably arises: If modern methodology in Old Testament exegesis has brought men to the point where they can no longer "imitate" the apostles, may it not be that we are in the last stages of a grandiose aberration, comparable to the age-long domination of the fourfold sense in patristic and medieval exegesis?

Whatever one may think of Wilhelm Vischer's attempt to interpret the Old Testament "Messianologically" with resolute consistency,<sup>15</sup> he has raised the question of the nexus between the Testaments in a pointed and not-to-be-evaded way.<sup>16</sup> And it can hardly be said that the challenge of Von Hofmann (that we follow the apostolic interpretation of the Old Testament with a real sympathy for what is essentially characteristic of it and derive our herme-

neutics for Old Testament interpretation from it)<sup>17</sup> has yet been really met.

### *The Diaconic Character of "Mimesis"*

*Mimesis*, as a recognition of apostolic authority, involves a recognition of the diaconic character of all apostolic speaking. The *genus proximum* in the definition of the work of the interpreter of the Bible is therefore not some branch of scholarship, some form of *Wissenschaft*, but ministry. Jesus put the imprint of ministry upon the apostolate once for all when He described His own Messianic mission as ministry (Matt. 20:25-28), and the apostles in turn put that same diaconic imprint upon the apostolic church.<sup>18</sup> A life of ministry is, as Jesus' word indicates, abnormal for man as man; it goes against the grain of our manhood. The life of the interpreter is therefore a life of repentance, a radical aversion from self and denial of self. It is a life in Christ, a life of faith in Him who loved us and gave Himself for us in a ministry carried out to the utmost. It is a life in the Spirit, who is given for ministry (1 Cor. 12). In a word, it is a life in the church which is upbuilding itself in love.

Ministry is personal; it is a giving of *oneself* to others. One may expect of the interpreter therefore that he submit himself wholly to the Word, with which he

<sup>15</sup> *Das Christuszeugnis des Alten Testaments*, I (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1935).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32: "Eine Kirche, die den Wert des alttestamentlichen Zeugnisses gegenüber dem neutestamentlichen herabsetzt, glaubt den Aposteln gerade das Entscheidende ihrer Botschaft nicht und hört auf, 'christlich' zu sein. Denn das Entscheidende der apostolischen Verkündigung ist nun einmal, Jesus sei der Christus des Alten Testaments." Pp. 33, 34: "... der Christus Jesus des Neuen Testaments steht tatsächlich im Fluchtpunkt der alttestamentlichen Perspektive. Nun scheint aber die moderne Bibelwissenschaft eindeutig und endgültig das Gegenteil bewiesen zu haben. ... Die Frage ist jedoch, ob nicht die Methoden und Ergebnisse dieser Forschung begründete Zweifel gegen sich erwecken. Steht nicht diese moderne Forschung, mehr als bei der Auslegung alter Texte erlaubt ist, im Banne einer modernen Wissenschaftslehre? Trägt sie nicht fremde Gesichtspunkte ein?" Cf. also pp. 35, 36.

<sup>17</sup> P. 11: "... Unsere Schriftwissenschaft, soweit sie das Alte Testament betrifft, hat keine höhere Aufgabe als die, zu einer wissenschaftlich begründeten Methode der Schriftauslegung zu gelangen, vermöge deren wir mit Bewusstsein und unter Aufzeigung der von den Aposteln unausgesprochenen Vermittlung ebenso auslegen, wie die Apostel ausgelegt haben, welche es unvermittelterweise thaten."

<sup>18</sup> E. g., Eph. 4:12; 1 Peter 4:10, 11; 1 Cor. 16:15; Heb. 6:10.

deals. One may not expect of the interpreter an impersonal and iron objectivity or a gray neutrality over against his materials and over against those whom he serves. His heart must needs burn within him. While ministry is personal in this sense, it is also selfless. No professional vanity, no passion for professional acceptance, no striving for "intellectual respectability," keeps the interpreter from going his diaconic way; he is ready to risk contempt and endure professional obscurity for the sake of ministry to the church.

Ministry is toil and labor (2 Cor. 6:3-5; 11:28, 29). To conceive of interpretation as being, first and foremost, a ministry is not to enter a plea for what has been called holy shortcuts in interpretation. Ministry is the motivation for the severest kind of scholarly discipline. Interpretation gets its scholarly character from its diaconic nature; it is scholarly and "scientific" just because it fulfills its diaconic function wholeheartedly and scrupulously according to the norms dictated by its materials. However, the Pastoral Letters constantly remind the interpreter that he need not and cannot consider it a part of his duty to dispute endlessly about every wrongheaded and wronghearted interpretation that demands to be heard in Christendom.<sup>19</sup>

If the interpreter is a minister, diaconic restatement of the Word he has heard, restatement in terms of here and now, is part of his task. The interpreter, of course, ministers in meekness and commits the success of the Word to Him who gave it. He will not seek to storm the citadel of the modern mind with weapons his Lord has not allowed him. Nor will he abridge or distort the apostolic Word in order to

conciliate prejudices which are rooted in man's proud rejection of God. But that aside, the apostolic message becomes, since it is received in faith, the interpreter's own. He is one with it and therefore speaks it to men in terms native to them and so seeks by all means to save some.<sup>20</sup>

## II. THE INTERPRETER'S *Mimesis* AS A CONTINUATION OF THE APOSTOLIC TASK

The task of the apostles is the fundamental and normative initiation of that rhythm of hearing and telling which is the history of the church.<sup>21</sup> The apostles receive the Word from their Lord in order that they may transmit it; their hearers receive the Word from them in order that the Word (still the Word of the Lord) may sound forth from them (1 Thess. 1:6-8). The risen Christ's outpouring of the Spirit upon the Twelve is the first beat of the New Testament music of the inspiration of all flesh (Acts 2:17, 33). The Good Shepherd (John 10:11), who remains always the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4), makes the apostle the shepherd over His sheep and lambs (John 21:16, 17). This shepherd-rhythm continues in the church which the apostolic Word calls into being. In it the elders are shepherds over the flock of God (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-4; Eph. 4:11), and their tireless shepherd love seeks and saves the lost lives and works on in the whole church, where

<sup>20</sup> One might raise the question whether *διακονία* does not impose the duty to be brief; the compressed and pregnant eloquence of the New Testament is in striking contrast to the loquacity of its interpreters. Where is Bengel's laconic successor?

<sup>21</sup> I owe the image to Werner Elert, *Der Christliche Glaube*, 3d ed. (Hamburg: Furcht-Verlag, 1956), p. 174.

<sup>19</sup> E. g., 2 Tim. 2:14 ff.

brother seeks and saves his brother. (Matt. 18:12-15; James 5:20)

The ministering Christ (Matt. 20:28) creates apostles who are ministers (2 Cor. 4:1; 6:3 f.; 11:8); their Word fits out the saints for their task of ministry (Eph. 4:12). Christ is Witness (John 18:37; Rev. 1:5; 1 Tim. 6:13); His apostles are witnesses; the apostolic church is a church of witnesses (Acts 22:20; Rev. 2:13; 6:9; etc.). Christ is the Light of the world (John 8:12; 12:46); through Him the apostles are the light of the world (Matt. 5:14; 2 Cor. 4:6); and the members of the apostolic church are shining luminaries in the world, as they hold fast the Word of life, which they have received (Phil. 2:15, 16). The Christ has the keys (Rev. 1:18); the apostle of Christ looses and binds (Matt. 16:19); the apostolic church looses and binds with divine authority (Matt. 18:18; 1 Cor. 5:2-5). The Christ is the Rock, the Foundation (1 Peter. 5:4; 1 Cor. 3:10, 11); the bearers of His Word, apostle and prophet, are the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20-22); on them the church rests, not as an inert mass but as living stones built into a growing temple. (1 Peter 5:5; Eph. 2:20-22)

The interpreter's task has its place in this rhythm of hearing and telling. The interpreter hears the apostolic Word and the Old Testament Word, which is the indispensable background and presupposition of the word of the apostles. He hears in the New Testament sense of the word "hearing"—he hears and accepts in the pure passivity of faith and in the resolute and active reversal of repentance; his hearing is "the obedience of faith."<sup>22</sup> Such

hearing of necessity leads to telling; "We cannot but speak" is the inner dynamic of this perpetual rhythm in the church. The prodigal variety of verbs of telling in the New Testament<sup>23</sup> is an indication of the all-embracing character of the apostolic proclamation. The Word, which they proclaim, wholly claims the whole life of man in a graciously total confiscation. It indicates also how comprehensive the task of the interpreter as *mimesis* is. The interpreter's work of keeping the church in vital contact with the primary impulse of the apostolic Word may be roughly defined as a threefold one: it serves to maintain the genuinely apostolic rhythm for the edification of the church; it serves to extend that rhythm for the enlargement of the church; and it serves to correct that rhythm, where it falters or grows false, for the continual reformation of the church. The interpreter has need of grace, above all men in the church; his is the high privilege and the awesome responsibility of being pastor, missionary, and reformer all in one. And in all three of his functions there must be the characteristically apostolic strain of doxology.

The interpreter cannot shake off his fearful sense of responsibility; but he can take comfort in the fact that he is not alone. He "comprehends with all the saints." He has fathers who were before him and brothers who stand beside him. He can look back over the history of interpretation and find good guidance there, not least in the record of men's tragic aberrations in their hearing and telling of the Word. The fact that these aberrations more often than not stemmed from the

<sup>22</sup> Cf. G. Kittel in *Tb. W.* I, 220, 221.

<sup>23</sup> Friedrich lists 32 synonyms for "preaching," *Tb. W.* III, 701, 702.



unquestioned a prioris of the times should make him critical of the a prioris of his own time and should make him scrutinize his own with a wary eye. He can hear in the Confessions the voice of his fathers in the faith, to whom was given grace to hear again the primal apostolic and prophetic Word and to tell it with such assured clarity and force as to put all succeeding generations in their debt. He can acknowledge the debt and document his gratitude only in using these confessions as they themselves want to be used, as interpretations of the Word of God.<sup>24</sup>

The interpreter has brothers beside him. He serves them and is served by them. Since the interpreter's ministry is, of all the ministries in the church, characterized by the most immediate and intense preoccupation with the apostolic Word, which determines the whole life movement of the church, he is in a position to serve, challenge, and correct the systematician, the preacher, the catechist, the hymnodist, and the liturgist. But on the other hand, since his is the most "theoretic" of the ministries, he can and should be served, challenged, and corrected by those whose ministries are more directly diaconic and doxological in character, for each of these also functions as interpreter and is peculiarly conditioned for his work as interpreter by the

task he performs in the church. While the interpreter cannot compromise the apostolic witness in the interests of the supposed needs or a desiderated function of the contemporary church, the genuine needs of the church and the claims of the genuine function of the church can and should aid and guide him in his apprehension of the Word of God.

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What, then, is the posture of the interpreter? It is the posture of the obedient hearer and the overawed beholder. He hears the verdict of the righteous God of the Law without evasion or attempts at self-defense; he hears with all defenses down. He looks upon the God of grace as He reveals Himself in the face of His Son and says with Job: "Now mine eye seeth Thee; wherefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:5,6)

If he abhors himself, he is set free for God, and his posture is the posture of adoration. His task of interpretation is a priestly ministration of the Word. He sees in the apostolate the vehicle by which God's last Word comes to him, the token and evidence of God's infinite condescension, a manifesting of God's impetus toward incarnation, and he glorifies the God who has given such authority to men.

His heart burns within him as he hears the Word, and he hastens to tell his brethren. The vision that overawes him also sets him to work; like Paul, he is not disobedient to the heavenly vision. His posture is the posture of ministry.

St. Louis, Mo.

<sup>24</sup> "Ein Bekenntnis steht nur insoweit in Geltung, als es die Funktion der Schriftauslegung auszuüben vermag." G. Gloege, in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 3d ed., Vol. I, Col. 997. More should be said on the place of confessions in the work of the Lutheran interpreters than the limitations of this paper permit.