

Basic Issues in Modern Theology: Revelation in History

Fourth in a Series (Part II)

The *Heilsgeschichte* emphasis on historical revelation represents a development that moves beyond both Bultmann and Barth and that is as distasteful to one as to the other. Barth avoids the concept of *Heilsgeschichte*, preferring to speak instead of "the *Geschichte Jesu Christi*," of that which "happens and continues to happen." The tendency of both post-Bultmannian and *Heilsgeschichte* scholars to resurrect the search for the historic Jesus he considers a mistake that regrettably "returns to the way of the nineteenth century." "It marks a retreat from the New Testament witness," contends Barth, "to something behind the witness and existing independently of it." "I don't like the term '*Historie*' [knowledge of what has happened]," protests Barth, and "much prefer '*Geschichte*' [something that happens]." Barth's view of the role of historical investigation in relation to faith remains so negative that historical research, as he sees it, not only may lead to a false construction but "must yield a Jesus not identical with the Christ of the New Testament." Nonetheless New Testament scholars are increasingly pursuing exegetical and historical studies and are letting the dialectical theologians paddle for themselves.

Yet the *Heilsgeschichte* emphasis on historical revelation surrenders on the one side what it gains on the other insofar as it suspends the meaning of that revelation on spiritual decision rather than deriving it from an authoritative Scripture through historical investigation. Some *Heilsgeschichte* scholars view the truth of revelation not as universally accessible and valid for all men but, in agreement with Barth and Bultmann, as existing only for some persons in and through a miracle of grace. Thus the meaning of revelation is presumably carried not by saving history or the biblical interpretation but by spiritual decision.

Precisely at this point the young but growing Pan-

nenberg school insists on historical revelation in a larger sense that incorporates additional elements of an evangelical theology. In his *Offenbarung als Geschichte*, a recently translated work, Pannenberg sees the denial of the objectivity of revelation as a threat to the very reality of revelation. Contrary to Barth's contentment with "objectifying" elements in dogmatics, he insists upon the objectivity of divine revelation. Pannenberg vigorously opposes the way in which the dialectical theology relates revelation and its meaning to truth and history alike. He deplores the Barth-Brunner legerdemain with the problem of revelation and history—as when Brunner says that the kerygma which brings forth faith includes history "but not in the isolation which the historian demands." It distresses him that whenever the dialectical theologians run into a historical problem they rise above it by appealing evasively to the self-communication of God.

Although he reasserts objective historical revelation, Pannenberg does not preserve the traditional distinction between general and special revelation. What has happened in time, he says, is God's revelation as such, but what has happened in Jesus Christ is the real clue to the totality of happenings. Barth criticizes this approach, contending that no such "general revelation" exists, but only a particular revelation of God's doing. Pannenberg holds that everyone stands in some relation to God and therefore has a general knowledge of God; but this knowledge he refuses to call revelation. Revelation he defines as the self-disclosure of God in the end-time (because at the end of his deeds) as realized proleptically in Jesus. In defining revelation as history, Pannenberg holds we must regain an original "eschatological understanding." On this basis he criticizes Cullmann's view of Christ at the middle of the time line of saving history, and holds instead that Christ is the end of his-

tory as fulfillment. Yet this end is at once always present and also future. Whereas Bultmann connects the Old and New Testaments in existential decision and *Heilsgeschichte* scholars connect them historically, Pannenberg relates them apocalyptically. Some *Heilsgeschichte* scholars protest that Pannenberg's main interest is *Universalsgeschichte*, or universal history, rather than salvation-history; but Pannenberg's correlation of divine disclosure with special revelation means that he, like Barth, views all divine revelation as saving. In fact, Pannenberg assertedly seeks to carry out the basic intentions of his former teacher, intentions that he thinks Barth weakened by his dialectical concessions.

RADICAL TRANSCENDENCE

The main significance of the Pannenberg plea for objective historical revelation is its open recognition that unsatisfactory formulations of the transcendence of God and of the relation between eternity and time have dominated European theology since Kierkegaard. It is noteworthy that in Kierkegaard's homeland the Copenhagen theologian N. H. Söe (who thinks S. K.'s influence is here to stay) criticizes Kierkegaard's time-eternity disjunction as being objectionably philosophical. Kierkegaard, says Söe, finds his concept of time in Greek rather than in Palestinian motifs. Like Cullmann, Söe views time as created by God and made therefore to receive God's revelation. But Söe does not on that account view divine revelation as objectively given in history, because with Kierkegaard and Barth he understands revelation in terms of singularity and as existing for man in any given moment only as an act of grace. At this point Söe's thought mirrors S. K.'s *Postscript*. Despite theological perpetuations of Kierkegaard's views, Kierkegaard now is little followed by European philosophers. And even among Danish theologians his positions are brought under increasing criticism. K. E. Lögstrup of Aarhus assails especially Kierkegaard's individualistic emphasis and self-centered approach to the teaching of Christian love.

Anders Nygren of Lund, whom Gustaf Wingren groups with Barth and Bultmann in *Theology in Conflict* (1958) because of his inversion of Gospel and Law, is nonetheless a stern critic of Barth's extreme disjunction of eternity and time. "We must be done," he says, "with the docetic notions of revelation so popular in

our generation." Barth found his point of departure in Plato and Kierkegaard, remarks Nygren, and he was "right in drawing the consequences, that we cannot truly speak of God" once eternity and time are over-separated this way. "But," counters Nygren, "on the basis of God's image in man, now shattered, and especially of the incarnation, we may indeed speak of God." Over against Barth, Nygren speaks of God's continuing revelation in nature, history, and conscience.

Helmut Thielicke of Hamburg assails Barth's and Bultmann's radical disjunction of eternity and time from another angle. Their approach, he says, left the Church impotent to provide a social ethics. "The Barth-Bultmann theology was unable to stimulate the ethical concern of the Church, the latter because Bultmann places everything within the individual, the former because Barth so idealizes Christ that even *Heilsgeschichte* gets lost in a 'supernatural *Heilsgeschichte*.' Hence Barth must superimpose the New Testament imperative and indicative upon his dialectical formulation." Although Barth was a strong opponent of the Third Reich, the effect of his theology, Thielicke contends, "was to call the Church to think of itself while the world was left to itself. No Christian criterion was given to the world whereby the world could judge itself. As a consequence, both the self-certainty of the Church and the self-certainty of secularism increased." Unlike Barth, Thielicke insists upon general revelation. Although man is "subjectively closed to the revelation," an ethical possibility exists different from Barth's projection—though not without its own difficulties. Thielicke asserts that the kerygma-theologians "forget that the objects of theology are the actions of God—and that involves history."

THE HISTORICAL JESUS

Thus far rationalistic and irrationalistic liberalism alike have failed to discover the authentic historical Jesus. Both Bultmann and Barth deplore the historical critical method as leading necessarily to a false Christ. There is growing suspicion that not the facts about revelation and history and faith but prior dialectical-existentialist assumptions arbitrarily dictate this verdict.

Those who insist upon the importance of the Jesus of history as decisive for Christian faith now follow two main avenues—one illustrated by Ethelbert Stauffer, the retired Erlangen New Testament scholar, and the other by the Uppsala New Testament exegetes Birger Gerhardsson and Harald Riesenfeld. Stauffer proceeds on the nineteenth-century notion of a fundamental break between Jesus and the primitive Church. "I see only one way to find an objective basis for our Christian thought and life: the question of the historic Jesus," says Stauffer. "The historical Jesus in the Bible is my canon." And the starting point of this truly historical Jesus, he identifies infallibly with "those few hundred words" where the Evangelists give us what is a scandal to them or to the early Church. "There they record what belongs to the historical Jesus." While Stauffer insists that "the word, the work, and the way of Jesus are cru-

THERE ON A MOUNTAIN-TOP

*There on a mountain-top, across a glen,
I saw one giant pine that flung its height
Bravely above the rest, and high in air
Towering sheer, and climbing to the light,
Strong and wind-swept, solitary there—
So Christ above the mountain-tops of men!*

SAMUEL M. SHOEMAKER

cial," the Swedish scholars assail the presuppositions underlying his historical study. "A valid methodology," protests Riesenfeld, "will recognize the continuity between Jesus and the primitive Church." Nor are the Uppsala exegetes impressed by a second assumption that Stauffer shares with Hans Conzelmann, namely, that anything found in Judaism is not to be ascribed to Jesus. That is simply the myth of the total originality of Jesus, whereas Jesus is not without a point of contact in Judaism.

Riesenfeld and Gerhardsson boldly criticize one crucial presupposition of the *Formgeschichte* of Dibelius and Bultmann. In a climate of mounting criticism of Bultmann's methodology, now also joined by Roman Catholic writers (most significantly Heinz Schürmann of Erfurt, Germany), they call for a new approach that treats historical questions earnestly. Riesenfeld and Gerhardsson dispute the Bultmannian notion that one can immediately elucidate the formulation of New Testament material by applying the form-critical method. While they grant that every Gospel pericope has its life situation in the history of the primitive

Church, they reject the inference that the pericope has therefore been *created* by the primitive Church. They concede further that the content has been changed and modified by the primitive Church, but they insist nonetheless that a real tradition originating with Jesus himself is included. What the Uppsala scholars demand, therefore, is a methodology aware of the firmness of this tradition.

"The Bultmannian theology is a twin sister of the form-critical view of the origin of the Gospel tradition," notes Gerhardsson. "The two presuppose one another. But I don't find that the a priori skepticism, which determines the form-critical program, is historically justified. I am trying to find a method of exploring—by way of purely historical research—the way in which the Gospel tradition was transmitted—technically speaking—in the early Church. Historical research cannot solve theological problems—in any case not all of them—but it can help theology by way of providing some firm points and basic values. And the unwarranted a priori skepticism of the form-critics can hardly serve as a basis for a realistic theology." □

RELIGION AND POLITICS

I am aware that at certain times religion may strengthen this influence, which originates in itself, by the artificial power of the laws, and by the support of those temporal institutions which direct society. Religions, intimately united to the governments of the earth, have been known to exercise a sovereign authority derived from the twofold source of terror and of faith; but when a religion contracts an alliance of this nature, I do not hesitate to affirm that it commits the same error, as a man who should sacrifice his future to his present welfare; and in obtaining a power to which it has no claim, it risks that authority which is rightfully its own. When a religion founds its empire upon the desire of immortality which lives in every human heart, it may aspire to universal dominion: but when it connects itself with a government, it must necessarily adopt maxims which are only applicable to certain nations. Thus, in forming an alliance with a political power, religion augments its authority over a few, and forfeits the hope of reigning over all.

As long as a religion rests upon those sentiments which are the consolation of all affliction, it may attract the affections of mankind. But if it be mixed up with the bitter passions of the world, it may be constrained to defend allies whom its interests, and not the principle of love, have given to it; or to repel as antagonists men who are still attached to its own spirit, however opposed they may be to the powers to which it is allied. The Church cannot share the temporal power of the State, without being the object of a portion of that animosity which the latter excites.

The political powers which seem to be most firmly established have frequently no better guarantee for their duration, than the opinions of a generation, the interests of the time, or the life of an individual. A law may modify the social condition which seems to be most fixed and determinate; and with the social condition everything else must change. The powers of society are more or less fugitive, like the years which we spend upon the earth; they succeed each other with rapidity like the fleeting cares of life; and no government has ever yet been founded upon an invariable disposition of the human heart, or upon an imperishable interest.

As long as religion is sustained by those feelings, propensities, and passions which are found to occur under the same forms, at all the different periods of history, it may defy the efforts of time; or at least it can only be destroyed by another religion. But when religion clings to the interests of the world, it becomes almost as fragile a thing as the powers of earth. It is the only one of them all which can hope for immortality; but if it be connected with their ephemeral authority, it shares their fortunes, and may fall with those transient passions which supported them for a day. The alliance which religion contracts with political powers must needs be onerous to itself; since it does not require their assistance to live, and by giving them its assistance it may be exposed to decay.—ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, *Democracy in America*, Vol. I (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), on "Principal Causes Which Render Religion Powerful in America," pp. 367-69.

LESSONS FROM THE APOCALYPSE

The seven churches of Asia Minor were real churches, in which Christ's Gospel had been preached and sinners given new life and hope. They existed as actual historical entities in a province of Roman Asia in the closing decades of the first century.

The Apostle John, their spiritual leader, was deported to the Isle of Patmos during the Emperor Domitian's persecution in A.D. 98. While he was in exile, the Risen Head of the Church gave him in a vision urgent messages for these churches, already menaced by sin and heresy.

"These letters concern us," notes Professor Jean Cadier, "as the whole Bible does. What the Spirit says

to the churches he says to all the churches throughout the centuries, throughout the world. The seven letters of the apocalypse are powerful in their relevance to *our own churches*, which also know the menace of heresy, the temptation of syncretism, the peril of indifference, and even they do well to listen to the call to repentance and vigilance." Faithfulness or faithlessness of the churches in the midst of the ideologies and idolatries of this age is a crucial concern.

In the ruins of the churches of the past one may also view the shadows of the churches of today that heedlessly disregard what the Spirit says to the followers of Jesus Christ.—Ed.

RUINS OF THE SEVEN CHURCHES

Once a very important road in Asia Minor ran north along the Aegean coast from Ephesus into Smyrna and then to Pergamum. Another road that began at Pergamum ran southeast to Thyatira, farther south to Sardis, then southeast to Philadelphia and again southeast to the famous tri-city area of Hierapolis, Laodicea, Colosse. Thus we see the location of the seven churches of Revelation in sequence, political, ecclesiastical, or historical considerations aside.

When Christ gave his Revelation to John, at least a score of churches had been established in the province of Asia, which stood within the boundaries of the Attalide Kingdom of Pergamum. As representative of them, he selected these seven in the outlying cities of the renowned imperial route that formed a big loop in Asia. Beginning with Ephesus, each one was then a great cultural and commercial center.

These cities are now found in the Aegean region of Turkey, a fascinating area for pastors, professors, archaeologists, and lay people interested in church history.

THE RUINS OF EPHEBUS

The magnificent ruins of Ephesus lie near the modern town of Selchuk. At the edge of the town is the great and influential temple of Diana, which, along with its many religious purposes, was used as a de-

pository for city and private treasure. Today the site is completely desolate—a swampy area in rainy seasons.

Ephesus is doubtless the most sprawling of the seven cities, and very likely it boasted the largest church. This famous port was once connected with the Aegean by a channel of the river Cayster. The river constantly deposited at its mouth a great volume of silt, and this deposit eventually severed the city's naval ties with the outside world. This explains why Paul, on his way to Jerusalem, decided to sail past Ephesus and invited the elders of the church to Miletus (about fifty miles to the south) for his farewell message. Only in the distance can the sea be seen today from the midst of the ruins of Ephesus. The famous Arcadian Way and the warehouses bespeak a once busy city harbor, with its great volume of business and its many vices. The large theater (Acts 19:29, 31) with a seating capacity of 25,000 had a stage with three stories. Among the many ruins, a six-story building, several heathen temples, elaborate baths, the Odeon, the Library of Celsus, and the Gymnasium are striking. Located somewhere nearby was the school of Tyrannus. The Marble Road has a number of statues and other sculptures, some of which depict in relief the warriors with their various ornaments (Eph. 6:14-17). Paul and his fellow workers doubtless trod

this road many times in their efforts to evangelize the city. What remarkable experiences the Apostle must have had there during the two years when the whole Asiatic population heard the Word of the Lord (Acts 19:10).

In a totally heathen place, a completely orthodox church stood in the midst, with the best of pastors. Yet supreme love for the Saviour was lost. Consequently the lampstand too is gone, and Ephesus exists today merely as a heap of ruins.

SMYRNA, A MODERN CITY

We move northbound to Smyrna, the modern port city of Izmir, which, with a population of nearly half a million, is Turkey's third-largest city. The ancient Agora, or market place, covers a small area in a crowded downtown section. Very likely, Paul himself traveled here during his two years in Asia Minor and founded the church. The people no doubt had read Peter's First Epistle. From both Jews and Romans the church of Smyrna knew well what persecution meant. There was a large Jewish community in Smyrna that still exists, though greatly diminished in number.

The Roman persecution was particularly severe, and some turned away from the faith. But we recall the classic answer of Polycarp to the Roman soldier who was

trying to induce him to recant his faith: "Fourscore and six years He has been faithful to me. Can I be unfaithful to Him now?" With these words he met his rewarding death. His body is buried on a high hill awaiting the final resurrection.

This largest modern city in the area of the seven churches does not have a single local believer today!

PERGAMUM AND THE TOURISTS

Farther north, seventy miles beyond beautiful groves of olives and figs, stands Pergamum, a most strategically situated ancient capital on top of, and on the slopes of, the Acropolis. The modern Turkish town of Bergama, located in the valley below, has a population of about 20,000. It enjoys a steady flow of tourists.

Nearby, the grand establishment of Asclepium is built around a sacred spring. Pergamum owed part of her greatness to this center. Patients from all over the empire, among them the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, ran there to be healed in its supposedly miraculous waters. The sick gathered around the great Incubation Chamber with its complex underground passages and were treated through a method of suggestion. The colonnaded walk, library, theater, and marbled basins were means through which the sick were helped during treatment.

A German archaeological group is diligently excavating the ruins of Pergamum. The Acropolis was a spectacular site, with the palace of the Attalide dynasty at the very top. On it were also the library, whose 200,000 volumes were later carried to Alexandria, the gymnasium, the race track, the excellent water system, the baths, the great amphitheater. The homes stood on the lower terraces. All in all Pergamum was a beautiful capital city, comparable to some capitals today.

Christ called Pergamum "Satan's seat." The temple of Zeus, of which all the statuary and sculptured frieze is in East Berlin, was an exceptionally idolatrous center. After the Romans became heir to the kingdom of Pergamum around 30 B.C., they built the first temple, where the emperor was worshiped. The immense structure of the Basilica in Pergamum, at the edge of the present town, is the largest ruin in all Asia Minor. In it Christians were commanded to worship the statue of the emperor and burn incense before it. Some subscribed to this revived doctrine of Balaam; others, like the faithful Antipas (whose legendary tomb the Turkish guide is quick to point out), preferred to forego their lives rather than worship the emperor. The ruins of this great heathen cultic center remind us that Antipas did not lose his life but gained it.

THYATIRA, OR MODERN AKHISAR

We now turn east and, by following the great loop, arrive after a trip of fifty miles at Thyatira. The name is no longer Thyatira, for the modern Turkish city of Akhisar (White Castle) with a population of 30,000 is situated there. From this city came Lydia, a purple-seller and a worshiper of God (Acts 16:14). The province was also called Lydia, and the purple garment woven whole at Thyatira was known as "Lydia."

Akhisar has no striking ruins, only a small area of antiquity at its center. Like Tarsus, Syrian Antioch, and Damascus it is known as a continuous city, where the new was built on top of the old.

Thyatira's importance dates to its re-founding by Seleucus Nicator as a Macedonian colony and military outpost around the middle of the third century B.C. Through its two staple industries, dyed fabrics and copper work, it became a busy commercial center. Lydia was probably an agent of some great manufacturing concern and doubtless traveled to find markets for the product. The dyers of the various companies were united in guilds, many of which are mentioned in inscriptions. The members were always identified with the prevailing religion and offered common sacrificial meals.

The church of Thyatira therefore faced the issue of idolatry, since some of its members undoubtedly were working men and women. Jezebel, a certain woman in the church who exerted an influence like that of Jezebel in Israel, taught authoritatively that it was perfectly normal to be a Christian and also remain a member of the ordinary pagan society, indulging in idolatry and taking part in heathen rituals. The majority of the church tolerated this compromise. The small number that did not apparently failed to condemn this influential woman outright for her association with idolatrous practices and propagation of the heathen guilds. The guilds became a great snare to the church in Thyatira. The nature of the guild feasts is vividly portrayed in ancient reliefs found throughout Asia Minor.

All the commercial prominence and the highly organized heathen guilds are now entirely gone. Along with them, the church of Thyatira, which did not realize the great threat to her very existence, is also gone! Today the dwellers in Akhisar are entirely oblivious of the colorful history of their place and the reference in the Scriptures to an assembly that at one time existed in their very town.

SARDIS, ONCE GLORIOUS

From Thyatira we move directly south and arrive at Sardis, known as Sart in the

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