Jesus Christ, in his words and actions, life and death, is the ground and object of our faith, the source of a new kind of life.

1.1 To be Christian is to experience the call of Jesus now, as the one who offers us the power to live in a radically new and different way, and to respond to that call. But he can exercise this role only to the degree to which he is present to us today.

1.2 He is present in word (scripture) and sacrament, but it is in his presence in word, and there alone, that he can exercise a critical role in respect to the faith and life of Christians (that is, the word can say «no» - it can say that a form of thinking or acting which passes itself off as Christian, is not Christian.

1.3 Scripture is part of the original and originating event, which is normative for people of all times - normative for the way we think and act.

1.4 And for these reasons, it is vital that we discover the meaning of scripture.

2 The meaning of a text in itself, as a whole and in all of its parts, is what the author intends to say, what s/he wants to achieve or accomplish by writing the text, precisely in so far as this intent is embodied or coded in the text. This proviso is necessary, because it is possible that, for various reasons (lack of skill, the inadequacy of language itself, paucity of evidence), there may be few traces of the author's intent in an individual text.

2.1 Every serious text (a serious text is one which takes account of the human predicament and wants to offer some way of coping with it) uses language to give concrete form to ideas or ideals, in a way which appeals to the imagination, and therefore to the intelligence.

2.1.1 This is the way intelligence works; the only ideas which can be understood and which can move us are those which have taken imaginative form.

2.1.2 Every serious text embodies an insight into a deep, permanent, and universally valid truth; it is always a synthesis of what is true always and everywhere with what is uniquely true here and now.

2.1.3 Although authors of serious texts always address readers who live in a concrete and unique moment of history, and although these authors use language which also belongs to that unique moment, they want to say something which is not merely true for the passing moment, but universally true.

2.1.3.1 That is, authors address their contemporaries, but they always envision, with greater or lesser awareness, audiences in the indefinite future.

2.1.4 The author, even if dead, has the right to be understood in accordance with the meaning which s/he put in the text.

2.1.5 Although texts themselves do not have rights in the strict sense of the word, those who wrote the text do have rights, because the text is an extension, a prolongation, of the author's own person.

2.1.5.1 It is for this reason that the Gospels should not be «harmonized» - that is, made to say the same thing, on
the supposition that all of the writers shared a common view of Jesus.

2.1.6 The interpreter's interests are not decisive for the meaning of a text in itself.

2.1.7 And the interpreter's interests are important for determining the meaning of a text for us (or for the interpreter) only if those interests respect the original meaning of the text.

2.2 The fact that the serious text is a synthesis of the universally valid with the unique historical moment is the key to the enduring relevance of the classics.¹ This is what the word «classic» means.

3 Although meaning is what the author intends, the author's intentions may be of very different kinds, and several different intentions will often be found in a single text or literary work:

3.1 What the author says is always shaped by his/her intent.

3.1.1 And, depending on that intent, the text will be nearer or farther from being an objective description of events.

¹ Homer's work enshrines the virtues typically admired by pre-classical Greece: bravery, cleverness, the eagerness to know, to experience everything; but his poems have appealed to people of all places and times because these qualities are part of our makeup as human beings. Similarly, Virgil's hero embodies the admired Roman virtue of loyalty to the gods and to his mission, and a sense of Rome's eternal destiny; the purpose of the Aeneid is clearly to motivate Roman patriotism at the beginning of the Augustan era. But the Aeneid has classic status because steadfastness and self-sacrifice are human values, and are not restricted to just one period in Rome's history. Something similar is true of the Icelandic sagas (which celebrate courage and self-reliance) and of «Der Ring des Nibelungen,» in the Wagnerian interpretation, which is a tragic symbol of the sense of loss at the demise of the old absolutes at the end of the xix century.
3.2 The intention may be to inform, or to persuade, or to move to action.
3.3 Or it may be to entertain.
3.4 Or the intention may be to induce salutary fear which would move the hearers to change their way of life.
3.5 Or the intent may be to effect a radical conversion in the hearers, and to create new ways of acting, new possibilities of existence.
3.6 Or (and this is simply another way of saying the same thing) the intent may

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2 Much in both OT and NT intends to inform the reader about the demands of the Jahweh faith or the content of the Christian message, although not in a purely objective, distanced way. (cf Joshua 24) But here, rather than speaking of the desire to inform, it would be better to speak of illuminating the meaning of existence, and challenging the reader to act in accordance with that new meaning.

3 This intention is omnipresent in the NT, but the purpose is never mere intellectual correctness. «This is eternal life, that they may know you, the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.»

4 The calls for repentance in the prophetic literature come under this category, as do the calls for faith which we meet in the NT: «Change your way of living and believe in the Good News.» [Mark 1:14-15]

5 Examples would be the stories in Genesis about how clever Israel's ancestors were and how they put things over on their neighbors or enemies: Abraham and Pharaoh, Jacob and Esau, Jacob and Laban, as symbols for Israel's relations with Egypt, Edom, and Aram. The original tale behind the account of the pig-murder of Gerasa was probably a sly reference to Israel's pagan neighbors, who ate the meat of unclean animals, in whom it would be appropriate for demons to reside.

6 Much of the work of Amos and Hosea comes under this heading, and it appears in some of the parenetic material in Paul.

7 That is, a turning away from an old life and a turning toward a new.

8 Examples of this are Paul's references to the «new human being,» («Now I live, not I, but Christ lives in me») and to the fact that, in Christ, the traditional social distinctions between slave and free, man and woman (which keep us from acting in an authentically human way), have broken down, and hence we are freed to live in a new way. This new way of existing can be expressed in forms which are very strange to us - apocalyptic, for example. There, the intention may be to announce, in symbolic form, the end of a whole value system, and therefore of a whole world. Paul proclaims that the negativities of life have been conquered by God's presence in Jesus on the cross. John proclaims the enduring presence of God as love, present in Jesus who is now with us in the Spirit.
be to speak and write a word which has the power to challenge, to judge, to transform the hearer, and to make faith possible. To put it still another way, the intention may be to bring peace. «Go in peace,» «I have come so that you may have life and have it more fully.»

4 It is possible that the author may not be fully aware of what s/he wants to accomplish.

4.1 Not infrequently, unconscious desires, hopes, fears, find expression in the author's language, so we can speak of partially hidden intent.

4.1.1 But note that, hidden or not, these are the author's intentions; when motives are hidden, they still move us.

4.2 The author may touch on something universal and profound, but be so absorbed in its unique manifestation here and now, that s/he does not advert to its universal validity.

4.3 It is possible that the reader, either a contemporary, or one who approaches the text from a later age, may be able to discern some of these half-hidden motives and intentions, but this can be true only to the extent that the author has left «signals» in the text. This is not the place for guesswork.

4.4 Some have argued that there is a «fuller sense» of scripture, which was inserted by the divine author, without the human author being aware of it.

4.4.1 An example would be God's word to the serpent: «I will put enmity between you and the woman.» [Gen 3:15]

4.4.2 But this makes the human author look like a passive instrument.

4.4.3 And it raises the question of how it would be possible to discover the meaning of the divine author except in and through the meaning of the human author. Traditionalists often invoke the magisterium at this point, or speak of «the analogy of faith.»

4.4.4 The best position: God works in and through the human author, compiler, editor, and not «next to» him/her.

4.5 Questions about intentions of which the author was not aware make it necessary to broaden the meaning of the word «author,» to include the compilers, collectors, and editors, who modified the original word, gave it a new location, put it in a new constellation.

4.5.1 The mere fact that the Hebrew scriptures are, for Christians, the Old Testament, affects their meaning, and relates that meaning to the full and final revelation in Jesus Christ.

4.5.2 But this does not mean that the Old Testament can now be read as though it contained a number of predictions which «came true» in the New Testament. It means that a text which had and has its own proper meaning in itself can acquire a new meaning when it becomes part of a new «canon.» It acquires this new meaning because of the intentions of those who inserted it in the canon.

4.5.3 The Old Testament as a Christian document (part of the Christian scriptural canon) is not the same as that collection which is properly called «the Hebrew scriptures.»

5 When we ask about the meaning of a text, we have to realize that there is an ambi-
guity in the word «meaning»: we can speak of the meaning of a text in itself - that is, the intention of the author which is embodied in the text - and, in addition to this primary «meaning of meaning,» we can speak of the meaning of the text for us - that is, in so far as it can change the way we look at the world or lead our lives.

5.1 «Meaning» is primarily something we do - we mean things when we use words: meaning is an act of the human mind, of human intelligence, in which we unify and organize raw data.

5.1.1 The word «meaning» is also used to speak of the product or the result of such an organizing act of the human mind, and, in this sense, it refers to what we intend when we make statements or ask questions.

5.2 A second prenote: Meaning has to be distinguished from the thing-meant. A «thing-meant» is an object, somewhere in the real world or the world of imagination, which we have classified (put in a group or class) by an act of meaning or intending. Every meaning has a thing-meant which corresponds to it, either in the world «out there,» or in the world of imagination, or partly in both. The trees, the crags, and the stars exist «out there»; unicorns, dragons, and the Easter Bunny exist in the world of fantasy; and for some meanings (e.g. «intelligent life elsewhere in the universe») it is not certain whether the thing-meant exists «out there» or only in the overheated imaginations of science fiction buffs.

5.3 The meaning of a text for us depends on the meaning of the text in itself - that is, the author's intent, as embodied in the text.

5.4 But what does the word «depend» mean here?

5.4.1 It means that, before we can speak of the meaning of a text for us, we have to ask about the authors' intentions, even if we do not agree with them, as manifest in their writings.

5.4.2 For example, much of Leviticus, although presented as God's word to Moses, contains the program of post-exilic separatism, and was designed to make Jews a people apart from their Gentile neighbors, to make them a holy people. For us, it raises the question of what holiness really is, and of the dangers encountered in
trying to achieve a self-made holiness.  
5.4.3 But unless we are aware of what the author or editor meant, we will not be able to raise these serious questions for ourselves.  
5.5 When we ask about the meaning of a text for us, there is an unavoidable question: how can a text which was written in a past so profoundly different from the world in which we live today have any meaning for us in a situation which the original author could not possibly have envisaged.  
5.5.1 It can if the writer achieved or received a deep insight into the human situation, into a truth that transcends the unique moment of writing, and embodied that in his/her work.  
5.5.2 In the case of the Bible, this would be an appropriate place to speak of inspiration.  
5.5.2.1 Inspiration would be an event in which the human author experiences the powerful presence of God, and, in virtue of this, looks more deeply into the human situation, and issues a summons and a call which is God's own.  
5.5.2.2 It would mean that the transcendence of time of which a text is capable does not come about by our leaving the human world behind, but by moving into the depths of the human experience, since this is where God is to be found.  
5.5.3 But we will be able to find God's call or summons to achieve a human ideal, to be the human beings he wants us to be, only if we are aware of the means which the author used to communicate with his/her first readers.  
5.5.4 It is this which gives the historical-critical method, properly defined, primacy among all methods of interpreting scripture.  
5.6 Unless our search for the meaning of the text for us is based on and controlled by the meaning which the author had in writing the text, misunderstanding is likely, and total misunderstanding is not excluded.  
6 The interpreter cannot avoid the question of what is central, what peripheral, in scripture. This touches both questions of genre and of content.  
6.1 Proclamation or kerygma is the essential genre or category, and the other genres derive their adequacy from proclamation. Proclamation is what scripture really intends, because it is here that the paradoxical otherness of God breaks into the world and empowers our response.  
6.1.1 Other genres are valid to the degree that they are proclamation; this is true of apocalyptic, gospel narrative, doctrine, symbolic statement, folklore, and other genres.  
6.2 In respect to content, the original message of Jesus himself - what he intended - as we can reach this through historical-critical study of the Gospels, is the norm for all proclamation, and the «canon within the canon.»  
7 And finally we come to the questions to which all the preceding material has been leading: which hermeneutic, which theory and practice of interpretation, which way
of reading texts, will make their meaning accessible to us\textsuperscript{11} (that is, what the author meant when s/he wrote the text)?

7.1 Refer here to the short discussions of the word «meaning» in §5.1 and §5.2 above.

8 **Meaning** is something which we do as intelligent animals, and therefore, when we try to devise a strategy for getting at the meaning of a text, we need to reflect on the way human intelligence operates, on the way we know and understand.

8.1 Intelligence makes use of the imagination to organize the data coming from the senses; and therefore intelligence is tied to time and place, to unique historical moments. Intelligibility (the «sense» or the «meaning» of some thing or event) is always embodied in a unique historical moment.

8.2 Intelligence is eager to provide working models for everything, for data of all kinds; there is no limit to the desire to know.

8.2.1 The structure of these models is the structure of intelligence itself.

8.3 Intelligence works by using imagination to construct a working model to explain the data, the evidence, which the senses have provided. We «explain» data when we see it in a unified and orderly way.

8.4 Intelligence then tests this working model, to see if it «fits» the evidence. The greater or lesser adequacy in explaining the data, this fact that a theory «works,» is what we mean by the truth of an explanation.

8.5 This testing is really an act of assessing the model in the light of the evidence, to determine whether the model corresponds to the demands of the evidence; it recognizes the priority of the claims of reality over any model.

8.5.1 This shows that knowing is always an evaluative act, in which data is measured for intelligibility.

9 Looking more closely at the *historical* character of intelligence, we can say that it always deals with the concrete and unique (although it discovers the general, the universal, the repeatable, in the concrete and unique).

9.1 Human intelligence is bound to history because it always operates at a concrete historical moment (which is itself determined and conditioned in many ways by the past), and it strives to discover the intelligibility which is present in and at such a moment.

9.2 Human intelligence deals with events, and tries to understand them, by telling a story (the Greek verb *historeïn*, from which the word «history» is derived, means «to tell a story») - that is, by proposing a way of understanding the events, and then seeing if the story matches the facts. We create a story, and then see how well it matches, interprets, explains, the data.

9.2.1 The story is an attempt to make sense out of the data.

9.2.2 If the «fit» of the story to the data is good, then we say that we have understood the data.

9.2.3 Far from there being any contradiction or competition between

\textsuperscript{11} The phrase «make accessible» indicates that the meaning may not be obvious, but can be found only after the expenditure of some effort.
narrative methods in dealing with a text, (when they are properly understood) and the historical/critical approach (when it is rightly understood); they imply each other.

10 Looking more closely at the critical character of intelligence, we can say that intelligence is an essentially critical faculty, designed to distinguish appearance from reality.

10.1 Intelligence is fundamentally oriented toward what is, what really is, to all reality without any limits, and therefore it possesses a kind of built-in homing device which enables it to distinguish what appears to be true from what is true.

10.2 This unlimited desire to know reaches out to all reality, to everything that is or could be, and this «made for infinity» aspect is the source of its fecundity in providing working models.

10.2.1 In dealing with texts, intelligence wants to distinguish what the writer seems to be saying from what s/he is saying.

10.2.2 This involves an investigation of the language in which the document was written - that is, the whole way the writer looked at the world, organized his/her data, and this is what qualifies an approach as «historical.»

11 Misunderstandings and oversimplifications of the historical-critical approach.

11.1 The historical/critical approach, as understood here, is far more than a method or a technical tool which might be of use, among other methods in interpreting a text; it is rather a fundamental way of thinking about texts, about stories, about story-tellers, about the effects that texts and stories can and should have on us, about human intelligence and the way it operates (particularly about the relationship between intelligence and imagination).

11.1.1 Instead of speaking of «historical-critical method» it would be more accurate to speak of «historical-critical hermeneutic» - that is, the theory and practice of interpretation.

11.2 Many people think that the historical/critical approach is historical because it is interested in what really happened, and comes up with views very different from those which result from a naïve reading of the text.

11.2.1 A historical-critical hermeneutic is concerned about what really happened, and it often does question the historicity of events which were regarded as factual, but this is more incidental than central. And it is certainly an oversimplification, if the historical-critical approach is reduced to questioning the historicity of some of the biblical stories.

11.3 Many people think that the historical/critical approach is critical because it

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12 «Language» here is used in the broad sense; it does not refer to the grammar and vocabulary which are distinctive, for example, of English, Russian, French, German etc.; it refers rather to all of the resources of thought and expression which are at the disposal of people because of the time at which and the place in which they live.
starts with the assumption that traditional ways of understanding should be subjected to judgment, and modified on the basis of new evidence.

11.3.1 It is true that practitioners of a historical-critical hermeneutic are not afraid to call some of the biblical material legendary, folkloric, and mythical, even though that material has traditionally been viewed as factual, historical. But this is not the heart of the matter, and to reduce critical method to this would be a massive oversimplification.

12 A better view of the why historical-critical hermeneutic is \textit{historical}.

12.1 The approach is historical, not because it concentrates solely on «what really happened,» (in the sense of objective, observable events) but because it recognizes that we can interpret a text only to the degree that we are aware of the historical situation of the writer.

12.2 «Historical,» in this connection, does not refer simply or principally to the desire to accurately reconstruct the actual biblical events, but rather to determining what the writer was really saying, \textit{which means, above all, reconstructing the thought world of the writer}.

12.2.1 The hermeneutic is historical because it is concerned about the view of the world, the value system of people who lived at that moment of history - about the way they viewed and tried to solve the problems of life, and about the way they saw their relationship with what is absolute and ultimate in life.

12.2.2 It is not that this hermeneutic is indifferent to what actually happened; for Christian faith, what actually happened is all-important. It is simply that we can only get at what actually happened through the text \textit{if we understand the kind of relationship to reality that the writer had, and how s/he expressed this in language}.

12.3 In summary, we have to ask what the historical factors are which conditioned the writers and put certain resources at their disposal (while denying them the use of others.

12.3.1 Some of these resources are, for example: being able to tell a story, having a certain view of story-telling and certain techniques for recounting events.

13 A better view of why a historical-critical hermeneutic is «critical» is that it tries to make judgments about what the writer is really saying, as distinct from what s/he seems to be saying.

13.1 That is, it uses its historical knowledge about the writers, their world, and their resources, in order to make these judgments.

13.2 And it uses this knowledge to make a distinction between what the text \textit{seems} to be saying and what it actually \textit{is} saying.

13.3 It is not critical because it wants to destroy traditional beliefs (as is often said by those who reject it); it is critical because it wants to determine what we are really called on to believe, what the object of faith is, and to distinguish real faith from parodies of faith.

14 Historical-critical hermeneutic is both historical and critical, not because these two
distinct elements must be found in the approach, although there is no necessary
and inherent relationship between them (as though it were possible to have an
approach which was historical, but not critical, or critical but not historical).
14.1 Rather, an approach will be historical only to the extent that it is critical.
14.1.1 That is, to the extent that it is open to evidence about what the
writer's world and world-view were like; to the extent to which it
strives to weigh, assess, and evaluate that evidence to see what
ways of thinking about the world it puts at our disposal, what judgments about these ways of thinking it authorizes, and what conclusions about the world of the writer it enables us to draw.
14.2 And an approach will be critical only to the extent that it is historical.
14.2.1 That is, to the extent to which it strives to understand the historical
situation of the writer, so as to be able to determine what s/he is
really asserting as distinct from what s/he seems to be asserting.
15 Since the 1970's some critics have been using a few of the newer forms of literary
criticism (for example, «narrative criticism» and «reader/response criticism» as
tools for understanding the Gospels.
15.1 Some propose these methods as substitutes for historical-critical hermeneutic, but they are incapable of filling that role, for reasons that will be clear
below.
15.2 However, these literary methods can be useful, precisely as part of a
historical-critical hermeneutic, provided we avoid certain exaggerations. For example:
15.3 It is helpful to view the Gospels, not simply as an assemblage of episodic
narratives, but as stories which were meant to be read (or heard: see §15.9
below) in their entirety.
15.4 And it can be helpful to develop a theory of narrative, and to try to give a
coherent and comprehensive answer to the question «What is narrative?».
15.4.1 This is true precisely because narrative is a principal resource
used by the Gospel writers, and is therefore a most appropriate
concern for a historical-critical hermeneutic; and because the form
which narrative takes is determined by historical and cultural fac-
tors.
15.5 And it can be helpful to examine a text in and for itself, before asking what
factors might have influenced it from the outside.
15.5.1 However, the author did draw on sources, and it is impossible to
understand much about his work if we deliberately ignore those
sources.
15.5.2 And, although the Gospels are stories, they are stories about
Jesus and they intend to mediate his message; the NT writings are
theology before they are literature.
15.5.3 And the author was influenced and conditioned by historical fac-
tors; for example, his historical period put certain ways of telling
stories at his disposal and deprived him of others.
15.6 It can be helpful to examine the structural details of the narratives (plot,
character, setting), but there is no evidence for the statement that the mean-

ing of the text is located in the details of its structure. Did the writer think that this was the case?

15.6.1 Neither does it make much sense to insist that the meaning of a literary work is not to be identified with the author's intent.

15.6.1.1 This astonishing abstraction is a consequence of looking at a literary work as though it had no connection with the one who wrote it.

15.7 Reflecting on the role of the narrator in each of the Gospels can be helpful, since this literary device is one of the resources used by the writers.

15.7.1 But theories which speak, for example, of how the author may side with the reader, against the narrator, demand a degree of subtlety on the part of the NT writers which strains credulity.

15.8 Reader/response criticism can also play a role, as part of a historical-critical hermeneutic.

15.8.1 The authors were obviously writing with certain readers in mind, and this is part of the world-view and self-understanding of each of the Gospel writers.

15.9 It certainly cannot hurt to be reminded that the Gospels were written in and for a culture which was less bound to the written word than our own culture; is, and therefore an emphasis on «orality» is useful.

15.9.1 But the Gospels were written down, and we have no evidence that, for example, Mark's Gospel was ever read in its entirety to an audience, at liturgy or in some other setting.

15.10 It is true that every literary work is meant to be read (or performed - but even here the actors have to read the text before performing); and it is also true that the literary work does not reach its goal until it is read.

15.10.1 But to conclude from this that the literary work, on its own level, is always unfinished, and requires completion by a conscious act on the part of a reader, is to confuse two questions which should be kept distinct: the question of the meaning of a text in itself, and the question of the meaning of a text for us.

15.11 Finally, the notion that, prior to the interpretative act, there is nothing in the text to be discovered, is an incoherent and self-contradictory absurdity.

16 Historical-critical hermeneutic is indispensable for understanding the NT, because Jesus opened up new possibilities of existence, and empowered his hearers to speak to God and about God in a new way, and only a historical/critical hermeneutic decodes his story and makes it possible for us to speak in this new way.

16.1 «Decoding» does not mean that we will leave the story behind, like an empty husk; it rather implies that the story is illuminated, its meaning disclosed, so that it can be understood, precisely as a story.

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13 And the Old Testament, of course, as well. But most of the ferment today is in the field of New Testament studies.
16.2 Being confronted with new possibilities of existence, having a new way of talking to God and about God, is what really happened, and it is infinitely more important than the historical «camcorder» factuality of one or another miracle story.

16.2.1 In other words, «what happened» is not precisely what would have been recorded by a camera, but rather the real offer and demand, the real empowering message of Jesus, which is present in the form of narrative about what he said and did.

16.2.2 And which is accessible, (because of the structure of human intelligence) only to a hermeneutic which is both historical and critical.