

- 1 At first sight, the apparent reduction, by historical criticism, of so much NT material to legend, folklore, and myth seems negative; much seems to have been lost. To many, critical method seems destructive of the simple faith of ages past. (And they often emphasize the uncertainty and variability of the work of historical critics as a way of rejecting the conclusions these critics propose.)
 - 1.1 Historical criticism is important, first of all, because it shows what Jesus was *not*. Jesus was not some kind of stunt man, going around performing striking miracles as proof of his claim, nor did he have a list of OT predictions about the Messiah, which he had to fulfill (things which would have made the first page of the National Enquirer in his day if there had been such a thing).
 - 1.2 But the conclusions of historical criticism have a far deeper and more important meaning: they show that in Jesus' words and actions we are confronted with an offer and a challenge and a demand that we might never have heard because we were so fascinated with the miracles and prophecies.
 - 1.2.1 It is important to remember that the only justification of critical method is that, with its help, we can discover Jesus' mystery and his message, as they really were.
- 2 The fact that we can discuss these questions does not mean that the commitment to search for the real meaning of scripture by making use of critical historical method is in peaceful possession of the field in all or most of the churches.
 - 2.1 Fundamentalism is rampant; many of the clergy (Catholic and Protestant) don't have a clue about the meaning of scripture; and most of the laity don't see any possibility of linking scripture with their daily cares and worries, joys and sorrows.
 - 2.1.1 Right wing vigilantism on the part of ultraconservative Catholics does not help.
- 3 Critical method has not given us many details of Jesus' life (the very words he spoke, whether or not this or that «healing» actually took place, etc.), but it has the potential to give us a clear outline of his message and his mystery. I would include the following elements in such a picture: (Not that there is universal consensus on these elements, but I defend them as justified by the critical reading of the text.)
 - 3.1 Jesus did not fit into anybody's ready made ideas about God (nor did he want to), and for this reason he did not claim the title «God» - to have done so would have been to accept and adopt the ideas of God which were current in his day (and now). Rather than accepting these ideas, he criticized them (for example, in the way he dealt with Sabbath observance and with fasting). *He redefined the word «God.»*
 - 3.2 He is the one who, in everything he says and does, brings the good news of a God whom people had never really known before. This is why people spoke of «a new teaching, with power.» [Mark 1:27]
 - 3.3 His attitude toward titles revealed something of his mystery; each title tried to hold him and to relate him to the «God» everybody knew; but this cannot be done because his God was the one nobody knew.
 - 3.4 He revealed who God is, not by talking about him, but by acting in his very person, and saying that the stance people take toward him is the stance they take toward God.
 - 3.4.1 He offered God's forgiveness and God's acceptance as though they were his own to give. [«Who can forgive sins but God alone?»]
 - 3.4.2 He understood himself as one in whose person God's love (=God) was revealed and present.
 - 3.4.3 Jesus does not just proclaim a message; he was aware of being, in his own person, God's definitive offer of healing, acceptance, salvation. The reign of God is breaking into the world in *him*. [«Today salvation has come to this house.» Luke 19]
 - 3.5 He wanted to make possible a new way of being a self, a person, and therefore a new way of acting toward the neighbor - a way which could not be covered by law.
 - 3.5.1 He did this by proclaiming that in him, God's sovereign lordship over the world was being asserted, and if we will only let God love us without bound or limit, a new and marvelous way of living will be opened up for us. This is his preaching of the «kingdom» or «reign» of God, and he lived it out in his unconditional acceptance of

- sinners, narrated in Mark 2:13-17.
- 3.5.2 The reign of God is secular; in God's name Jesus laid claim to the whole world, and not just to the «holy» or «sacred» dimensions of life. He did not invite his hearers into a religious nature preserve, but brought God to them where they were: in the field, by the seashore. He said that God was with them when the world's props were gone (the «Happiness Sayings»).
- 3.5.3 Jesus proclaimed freedom from the laws which force us to demand retaliation and from having to define our relationship with others in terms of law (divorce as a male prerogative).
- 3.5.4 He offered peace with God, with our neighbor, with ourselves.
- 4 Virtually the whole NT presents Jesus' relationship with God (that is, the Father), as mysterious in the extreme; Jesus makes God present in a completely human way. If God wanted to welcome finitude into himself, if he wanted to *become finite, truly and unrestrictedly finite, vulnerable to the destiny of death*, then Jesus is what would have happened; *it is what did happen*.
- 4.1 His total personal self, with his knowledge and understanding, decisions and freedom, *is God's own*.
- 4.1.1 God acts in all creatures as creator and sustainer, but they are his work, not himself.
- 4.2 The «two-natures-doctrine,» as traditionally understood, is not present in the NT.
- 4.3 Jesus asked for faith in himself, which meant redefining «God» and «human being.»
- 4.4 He radiated a sovereignty, simplicity, and peace, and never had to be imposing or impressive.
- 5 Scripture is the word of God; tradition is not. Tradition is our reception of God's word and our response to it.
- 5.1 But God's word is not unworldly or exclusively other-worldly; it is God's word spoken into the world, and therefore it is worldly. Precisely in its humanity, historicity, vulnerability, its subjection to the vicissitudes of time and place, scripture is God's own word. God really entered history in this word.
- 5.2 Scripture is not simply a word which God wishes or wants to be spoken; it is so deeply his word that he is present in it.
- 5.3 The only real parallel is that of christology. Jesus' total human reality, his human personality and selfhood are God's very own; he is the effective sign, the sacrament, of God and of God's presence in the world. Without any diminution of his human reality, God is present in him so fully that when we encounter him we encounter God.
- 5.4 Scripture shows that it is God's word because it has the power to change our lives *without making us fanatical, intolerant, or inhuman*.
- 5.4.1 Christians sometimes are all of these things, but only to the extent that they ignore the meaning of scripture.
- 5.4.2 Scripture shows that it is God's word because it confers a fulfillment which is beyond the power of ourselves and our world, but which we are always looking for at the center of our being, and which we can therefore recognize. Because we are human we seek transcendence, and we find that transcendence in scripture. [«You have the words of eternal life.»]
- 5.5 Scripture is the work of the Spirit; it manifests the present power of God. That is, it is the expression of who God is, the revelation of his mystery.
- 5.5.1 Scripture is the *primary, primordial, original, and originating* work of the Spirit (this is what it means to call it «inspired» - God himself is present there, in power), and no other claimed manifestation of the Spirit (for example, tradition) can dispense with being measured by the scriptural word.
- 5.5.2 Tradition is also the work of the Spirit, because the Spirit works in tradition by helping us hearken to the scriptural word.
- 5.6 In scripture, God word has assumed stable and enduring form. It is *there*, out in the open, challenging us to understand it and to submit ourselves to its judgment.
- 5.6.1 It can be ever new, enduringly new, «*kainé*,» God's word to every generation, *precisely because it does not change in itself*.

- 5.7 It is true that scripture is a factor *in* the church; it is *part* of the church; and it belongs to the definition of church. But scripture plays a critical and normative role in church life; it does not «disappear» in the church, and is never «absorbed» by the church.
- 5.7.1 It is never at the disposal of the church, to be used at the church's (that is, *churchmen's*) whim, and then ignored when churchmen feel like it.
- 5.7.2 This is true even when the word «church» is used in the proper sense - the whole community, the whole people of God - and it is even more true when the word «church» is used incorrectly, to designate the management sector of the community.
- 5.7.3 Scripture is not to be subordinated to any other norm or instance, because it has an originality and primacy about it which it shares with nothing else.
- 5.8 All speaking, all preaching, all teaching, all tradition in the church must come from scripture, and it is only in understanding scripture that we have a norm which enables us to judge where apostolic tradition is found and where it is not.
- 5.8.1 Scripture is the norm which can distinguish authentic development from un-Christian deviations in the so-called development of doctrine and dogma. It is scripture which makes reform in the church a permanent possibility, as long as the ultimately normative character of scripture is recognized.
- 6 Tradition is not a distinct source which exists apart from scripture; it is entirely dependent on scripture; tradition is the handing on of the scriptural word of God, the attempt to take that word seriously and to live by and out of it. It is the church's (that is, *our*) ongoing word about God's word.
- 6.1 Without scripture, tradition would have no content (there would be nothing to hand on).
- 6.1.1 Tradition would be the handing on of human religiosity (devotional practices, attempts to control God, mystification, magic, and superstition), modified by the fads of the age (and at times it has been all of these).
- 6.2 But without tradition, *rightly understood*, God's presence in his word would be a thing of the past, and God would be a God of the dead and not of the living.
- 6.2.1 Tradition is needed because the *normative revelation* recorded in scripture must go on, must continue to transform life.
- 6.2.2 This shows what tradition really is: the handing on of the scriptural message.
- 7 When tradition becomes the primary norm (in the sense that what has been done, or what is going on in the church, becomes normative), Christianity either succumbs to moralism, or falls prey to superstition and magic, or degenerates into being one religion among many - one more set of techniques for manipulating God.
- 7.1 As the original witnesses died, the living tradition was more subject to error, and scripture was written to insure that the church would maintain its identity. The originating period of revelation and its initial reception became normative.
- 7.1.1 It is true that the NT was written in the attempt to cope with the delay of the *parousía*, but this is really a question of the church's identity. Understanding the *parousía* involved showing that what Jesus said and did during his life was important, *and that eschatology is not just the proximate end of the world*. Without the story of his life, Jesus could be conveniently dissolved into myth.
- 8 What is often called, approvingly, the «living tradition» of the church has created and handed on many distortions:
- 8.1 The teaching, widespread in much of the early church for up to 200 years, that there were some sins that were simply unforgivable, even on the deathbed.
- 8.2 The doctrine of original sin being passed on through concupiscence (sexual intercourse).
- 8.3 Virginal Conception was a more noble way of conceiving a child. Note Trent's statement in DBS 1810 which anathematizes those who deny that virginity and celibacy are better and holier ways of life than marriage.
- 8.3.1 Ray says the real point was to defend the value of virginity against some of the Reformers. [!?!?] But can this be done by making a statement which is utterly without NT support?
- 8.4 The practice of not only tolerating, but encouraging private Masses.

- 8.5 The prominence accorded to private revelations (Lourdes, Fatima, probably some day Medjugorje).
- 8.6 The Crusades, in which, for 150 years, popes encouraged a Holy War against the Moslem population of the Holy Land.
- 8.7 The repeated trespassing on the territory of natural science and historiography, of which the Galileo episode, the rejection of evolution for a long period, and the insistence (up to 1943) that the creation narratives in Genesis are historical) are just the tip of the iceberg.
- 8.8 The un-evangelical contempt for human dignity and freedom which we find from the mid-nineteenth century almost to the mid-twentieth, in papal initiatives such as the Syllabus of Errors, the anti-modernist witch-hunt, and the Vatican's suppression of dissent.
- 9 Is an infallible teaching authority necessary for understanding and interpreting scripture correctly? It all depends on how such a teaching authority is understood, and where it resides.
 - 9.1 The Spirit him/herself is the primary teacher.
 - 9.2 We have to remember that the Spirit is given to the *whole* church, to this whole community which is called «the people of God.»
 - 9.2.1 This is the same as saying that God himself is powerfully present in this community which came into existence in response to the preaching and actions of his son, Jesus Christ.
 - 9.3 The community is not guaranteed, collectively or individually, total freedom from error; the church is also a human community, in which sin co-exists with grace, error and falsehood with truth.
 - 9.3.1 But sin and grace, error and truth, are not alternatives which compete on an equal footing. The community is *called* to grace and truth, and *promised* that grace and truth will be given, if the community is attentive to the promptings of the Spirit.
 - 9.4 The Spirit prompts and teaches the church in and through the original and originating message, insofar as this has taken stable form in scripture.
 - 9.5 The community's search for truth will always take place in an attentive listening to the original message, but there must be some in the community who have special responsibility for maintaining the original teaching and for insuring its contemporary vitality.
 - 9.5.1 This is the very nature of human communities.
 - 9.5.2 These leaders of the community derive their authority from the Spirit, who is given to the whole community. They are members of the community who are called to speak for the community.
 - 9.5.3 Just as each community needs leaders (and ultimately one who is responsible), so does the universal church.
 - 9.6 The authority possessed by these leaders is in no sense on a par with scripture, nor they dispose of scripture in any way. They *serve* the scriptural message by trying to preserve it and to state it clearly in contemporary language.
 - 9.7 Their authoritative statements are always to be measured by their dependence on scripture, and the leaders of the community should make this dependence clear in all of their teaching.
 - 9.7.1 Because scripture is the word of God which comes to us in a very human word, we must use methods of interpretation which respect the nature of the sources.
 - 9.8 To insure this dependence, they should consult with those in the church who have been called to make a special study of the meaning of the scriptural word. Exegetes, too, have the help of the Spirit.
 - 9.8.1 Exegesis done by competent Catholic scholars does not differ from that done by competent Protestant scholars; those who teach in the Christian community should draw the proper conclusions from this.

[The following section draws heavily on Raymond Brown's *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth*.]

- 10 The Virginal Conception raises some interesting questions about infallibility.
 - 10.1 From the year 200 to about the year 1800, the Virginal Conception was universally believed in

a biological sense; and by the usual theological criteria of Catholic theology, it would be called a doctrine infallibly taught by the ordinary magisterium.

- 10.2 Does this imply the need to qualify the notion of infallibility? There are several proposals.
 - 10.2.1 Discard infallibility or reduce it to indefectibility (Küng).
 - 10.2.2 Dulles talked about the «historical relativity of all doctrinal statements»; what would this mean if applied to the Virginal Conception?
 - 10.2.3 If the exact import of doctrinal statements is constantly subject to re-examination and precision in the light of new evidence (and this is as true of doctrinal statements as it is of scripture), then critical exegesis provides much of that new evidence.
 - 10.2.3.1 The Christian is bound to the acceptance of God's revelation as it is understood and taught in his time.
 - 10.2.3.2 As for the future, he can leave that to God's providence.
 - 10.2.3.3 But suppose s/he is virtually certain that it is not being understood correctly in his/her lifetime?
- 10.3 How valid are the past criteria for infallibility through ordinary magisterium?
 - 10.3.1 Were theologians correct in assuming that the Virginal Conception was universally and consistently proposed for belief as an intrinsic constituent of divine revelation?
 - 10.3.2 Or, was the Virginal Conception an unexamined doctrine which was taken for granted?
 - 10.3.3 And if so, are we bound by the unreflective teaching of the past?
- 10.4 Ray says that it would be a mistake for the magisterium to try to stop discussion.
 - 10.4.1 Those who are loyal would stop, leaving the field to those who are not. Today you can't stop discussion by fiat.