

- 1 If asked what characterizes the world we live in, the modern world, most people would probably point to technology.
  - 1.1 It is true that technology has given us things inconceivable only a couple of generations ago (and sometimes only a few decades ago): computers, men on the moon, nuclear weapons, gene splicing, *in vitro* fertilization, and reanimation procedures which would have looked to our grandparents like exercises in bringing the dead back to life.
  - 1.2 But serious as the moral and ethical problems are which technology has generated, none of them have the power to call into question the foundational revelation of God in Jesus Christ - the fact that God revealed himself and remains present in the man Jesus of Nazareth.
- 2 What really separates the modern world from all past ages is our sense of history; we know that we are not simply observers of change, but that *we ourselves* change.
  - 2.1 Evolution and our acknowledgment of its pervasiveness is a symptom of this.
    - 2.1.1 It is interesting but not surprising that fundamentalists have been the determined opponents of evolutionary theory.
  - 2.2 In the past 200 years the old approach to authority, which saw the past as normative, died. Today we use critical norms and demand evidence; the statement «we have always done it this way» no longer carries any weight.
- 3 This modern, historical world view represents a break with the Greek world view, which was cyclic, and a break with its heir, the medieval world view, which was static.
  - 3.1 This Greek world view passed into early Christianity after the end of the first century.
    - 3.1.1 This world view was still marked by antipathy to the existential and unique.
    - 3.1.2 This world lived under the spell of Plato. The words of Chrysippus are typical, and they echo the pathos and pessimism of all ancient civilization, in telling the myth of the eternal return: «Socrates and Plato will live again, and every man with his friends and fellow-citizens. Every village, every town, every field, will appear again, and this not only once, but time without end.» (*Fragmenta Stoicorum Veterum*)
    - 3.1.3 Typical also was Plato's view, expressed in the myth of the cave; the really real lies in another plane above and beyond space and time; the events of this world are without ultimate meaning.
    - 3.1.4 Greeks could be quite interested in the past; Thucydides, Herodotus, and Polybius bear witness to this, but for them, history was the field in which the human being, as a spectator, might discern eternal laws of personal and political conduct, but it was not a domain in which human beings themselves might change, and achieve a fuller, more authentic reality.
- 4 The rise of this modern historical and evolutionary world view seemed to pose a threat to Christian faith.

- 4.1 Christianity is vulnerable because it is a historical faith; it does not enunciate «eternal truths»; rather, it speaks of events which took place on the stage of history. In the Christian view of things, God revealed himself once and for all in Jesus of Nazareth, who was not just the teacher of a new way of righteousness, but who was, himself, as a historical figure, God's word to wo/men of all times and ages.
- 4.2 Historical scholarship may have begun by calling into question the six days of creation, the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and the historicity of the patriarchs, but it would eventually call into question the historicity of the raising of Lazarus from the dead, and of most of the other miracle stories.
- 4.3 The stage was set for an event which was fateful for theology and for the church: the first quest of the historical Jesus.
- 5 The first quest was not motivated by the desire to destroy Christian faith, but to put it on a firm foundation. Those who pursued it thought that the new methods of discovering and interpreting the past would help them attain this goal.
  - 5.1 The quest failed and its failure was documented by Albert Schweitzer.
    - 5.1.1 «Those who enjoy speaking of negative theology have an easy time with the conclusions reached by the search for the historical Jesus; they are negative. . . The search for the historical Jesus has been a remarkable story indeed. Scholars set out to find the historical Jesus and they thought that they could bring him, just as he was, into our own period, as teacher and lord. They loosened the bonds which held him chained to the rock of ecclesiastical dogma for centuries, and they were overjoyed as they saw his figure begin to stir with life and movement, and as they saw the historical human being, Jesus, begin to draw near. But he did not remain with them. He passed them by and returned to his own time. That fact shocked and alienated theologians of recent decades. Try as they might, they could not hold him. They had to let him pass, and he returned to his own time with the same necessity which forces a pendulum to return to its original position when released.»
  - 5.2 The reason for its failure: scholars did not understand the nature of their sources.
- 6 Reactions to that failure determined the most profiled Protestant theology of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Barth, Bultmann, Tillich.
  - 6.1 All three made a virtue out of necessity, asserting that what really counts is not the history of Jesus, but rather *the power of the preached word* (Barth), *the fact that Jesus came, although we can know nothing concrete about him* (Bultmann), *the biblical picture of Christ* (Tillich).
  - 6.2 Starting about 1950, there was a new quest of the historical Jesus, which broke with this pessimism about how much we could know of Jesus.
  - 6.3 In the eighties, Catholic scholars began to appropriate the new quest: no one would dream of writing a christology today without taking note of recent work on the historical Jesus.
  - 6.4 What the discovery of the historical Jesus can do: it cannot provide a basis for faith, but it can point out what we are called to believe.