

# The Bible and Preaching<sup>1</sup>

## *The Church's Word to the World*

By H. H. Farmer

*IT IS A TRUISM* that the task of the Christian preacher today is an immensely difficult one, possibly more difficult than it has ever been before. Many factors have combined to bring about this difficulty, and any one of them might be given extended consideration. The one factor which I now invite you to consider can be quite simply stated. On the one hand, the preacher must seek to present the Christian message in a way that makes it urgently and challengingly relevant to modern men living in this contemporary world of automobiles, airplanes, radio, cinemas, television, massed and urbanized populations, big business, scientific technology, mechanized industry and agriculture, impersonal economic pressures, vast collective nationalisms, totalitarian wars, and all the rest. On the other hand, he is expected to, and, as we shall see, can hardly do other than, preach from the Bible, from, that is to say, a heterogeneous collection of extremely ancient documents, the latest of which was written down nineteen hundred years ago and many of which are in large degree unintelligible except to expert scholars.

The problem all this raises is obvious and hardly needs dwelling on. The difficulty of communication, particularly in respect of insights and convictions which transcend mere matters of fact and have to do with ultimate meanings and values, is a familiar one in any sphere, but how much greater the difficulty if it be insisted that communication must be on the basis, and through the medium, of a distant, strange and long since vanished world of men and women, who speak another language, think in other categories, face other problems, than our own. No doubt we must not exaggerate this problem and difficulty. No doubt there is a sense in which the deep religious needs, and possibly also certain basic, archetypal religious terms and categories, persist in the human spirit throughout the ages, and make it possible for even the most ancient religious writings to speak to us across the centuries. No doubt it might be urged also that the very remoteness of the Bible world from our own, and its relative simplicity in comparison with the tangled complexities of our day, give to it a

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certain added power to confront men with the ultimate issues of their life. And, of course, we must never forget the mysterious co-operation of the Holy Spirit of God in the task of preaching and the way in which he can, and assuredly often does, make apparently the most unpromising material "come alive" to the hearer and speak directly to his condition. But even so, granting all this, the problem remains so far as the immediate, personal responsibility of the preacher is concerned, and no preacher can effectively discharge that responsibility, if he has not a continuous and even burdened sense of its challenge.

One might suppose that no preacher *could* be unaware of the problem, *could* be unaware of the strange and surprising thing he is setting out to do every time he prepares and preaches a sermon, namely, to confront modern men and women with the living truth of God primarily on the basis, and through the medium, of a collection of writings from a remote and antique world. Yet I get the impression that many, or at least some, preachers are not aware of the problem, or at any rate not aware of it enough. I get this impression sometimes from the mere reading of the Scripture in the course of the service of worship. "Hear the word of God," the minister says in a solemn, almost numinous tone of voice, and then proceeds perhaps to read a passage from one of the prophets so obscure and inconsequent that it may be guaranteed that not a soul in the congregation has at the end more than the dimmest idea of what it has all been about. And nowhere in the service is any elucidatory comment or exposition offered. "And may God add his blessing to the reading of his word," the minister concludes—a very necessary prayer under the circumstances, but one to which we have little right to expect an answer if it has been thus accompanied by a tacit shelving of our own responsibility. And in the preaching itself one has noticed how often the preacher is content to let biblical words or phrases slip glibly off the tongue—words or phrases which in Christian usage have become little more than clichés—without apparently any concern as to what exactly they may be expected to convey to, say, the "teen-age" typist in the choir who tomorrow will be tapping out invoices in a drab city office. That, of course, expresses the point in a rather extreme way, but at least it will serve to throw it into sharp relief, and it is a point not to be evaded by the irrelevant comment that after all we cannot be expected to bring everything down to the level of the "teen-age" typist in the choir.

#### TRENDS IN THEOLOGY

I am the more concerned to make the point because of two trends in contemporary theology which, working together, tend perhaps to foster in some young ministers, fresh from their theological studies, almost without

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their being aware of it, a certain indifference, or at least insusceptibility, to this problem of communication of which we are thinking.

One trend is the strong insistence today on our theology being *really* biblically based. The emphasis is on the word "really." We must not, it is rightly insisted, first think out a general theological or philosophical position which we deem suitable to, credible to, what is vaguely called "the modern mind," and then interpret the Bible in terms of that position, passing over, or explaining away, or forcing another meaning upon, anything that does not fit into it. That would not be to have your theology biblically based, but rather to have it biblically camouflaged, to give it as it were a biblical make-up; it would not be biblical "exegetics" so much as biblical "cosmetics." No, it means taking the fundamental truths, categories and presuppositions of biblical religion and thought really seriously and making them regulative and determinative of all else; and this we must do, it is said, not least at those points where the said truths, categories and presuppositions cut right across the mental habits of contemporary man.

Now I believe that this biblical trend is good and valuable for a number of reasons, into which I do not propose to enter; but it is easy to see that, inasmuch as this return to the Bible has in fact come about, in part at any rate, by way of reaction against those who went much too far in translating the Christian message into the idiom of modern fashions of thought—so far, that the result was almost completely out of touch with distinctive and historic Christianity—there is real danger of swinging now to the opposite extreme and not bother overmuch to make such a translation at all. There may well develop in the mind the feeling, if not the explicitly formulated thought, that even to want to accommodate the message to modern minds is already to have gone far in the direction of betraying it.

At this point the second trend is apt to make itself felt, reinforcing the first. This is the tendency, to be observed in at least some contemporary theology, to think of the Christian revelation, and therefore the Bible itself, as necessarily and essentially *opposed* to the mental habits of fallen humanity, so that any attempt to accommodate the one to the other is foredoomed to failure, such attempt being indeed itself but another manifestation of that pride of reason which is of the very essence of sin. When this way of thinking takes possession of the preacher's mind, it is very apt to produce, unless there is a great and tender love for men to keep it in check—for, let it be noted in passing, the urgent desire to solve this problem of communication is itself a manifestation of love—it is very apt to produce a sort of arrogance which says, in effect, to the modern man, not "come let us reason together," but "I'm telling you, take it or leave it," though, of course, the words will be decently concealed under the form of "This is the Word of God as given in the Bible; question it, or want it in any way accommodated

to your own mental habits, at your peril." In other words there is perhaps some danger today of a new kind of biblical fundamentalism, the old, bad fundamentalism of a literally inspired and inerrant text being replaced by a fundamentalism of biblical categories, analogies, thought-forms, on no account to be made the object of critical reflexion and reformulation. I suppose it has been some realization of this danger which has led Rudolf Bultmann to propound his challenging views about the necessity to restate what he calls the "mythological elements" in the New Testament if the latter is to be made intelligible to modern minds, and to the keen discussion amongst continental theologians of his views.

#### DEAD AND LIVING NORMS

All this by way of somewhat over-lengthy introduction. We must now get down to the main and somewhat narrow line of thought I propose to follow. Here, let us say, is a young preacher who *is* acutely aware of the problem of which we have been thinking, who is acutely aware of this strange and surprising thing he is called upon to do, namely, to confront modern men and women with the living truth of God on the basis of, through the medium of, a collection of documents from a remote and antique world. How may he adjust his mind and spirit to this strangeness? Certainly, he must not seek to banish the thought of it from his mind, and just get on with the preaching as best he can; for it is, as I have said, most necessary, if his preaching is to be effective, that he should be continuously aware of the problem all the time. On the other hand, he certainly must not allow the awareness of the problem to paralyze and inhibit his mind by insinuating into it even a hint of the thought that after all it is a pretty senseless thing, which, if he were cross-questioned about it, he would find it hard rationally to justify, thus to be tied to an ancient literature and never apparently to be allowed to preach to Christian people in the twentieth century on the deep things of God except on the basis of some text or passage drawn from it. On the older view of Scripture as having been once and for all communicated by God himself in a completely inerrant form, it was not difficult, or at any rate not so difficult, to rationalize and justify such a restriction. But that view, of course, is no longer possible for most of us. For the sort of theologically trained preacher that we have in mind we must find an entirely different perspective and setting and solution for the problem. I believe it is possible to do this, and to do it in a way that will help to justify, and to give meaning and zest and power to, preaching to modern folk from the Bible.

It is obvious that the problem we are raising is the problem of finding a satisfactory interpretation of, and reason for, that unique significance and authority which the Christian church has always ascribed to the Bible

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and which are reaffirmed by the regular act of preaching from it, and from it alone. And the first thing that has to be said is that the question is fundamentally a theological one; that is to say, it is a question which can only be answered on the basis of our general understanding of the essence of the Christian faith and message which we have to preach.

To say this, however, might seem to involve us at once in a serious difficulty. It is, however, a difficulty which proves on examination to be more apparent than real and at the same time to confront us with a truth which is important in relation to the whole problem. The difficulty is this: we have just said that we can only rightly understand the unique significance and authority of the Bible on the basis of our general understanding of the content of the Christian faith; but, it may be objected, if the Bible has unique significance and authority, how can we reach an understanding of the essence of the Christian faith prior to and independently of our understanding of that unique significance and authority. On the one hand, we must interpret the paramount authority of the Bible from the standpoint of the essential Christian faith and message, and on the other hand, if the Bible is such a paramount authority, we must clearly interpret the Christian faith and message from the standpoint of the Bible. Are we not thus going round in a circle? The answer to the difficulty is to draw the perhaps somewhat obvious, but nevertheless important, distinction between two types of authority or norm. There are what may be called extrinsic, or static, or dead norms and there are what may be called intrinsic, or immanent, or organic, or living norms. An example of the former is the measuring rod or yardstick, which exists independently of the objects it measures: it is brought to the objects, or they to it, and the transaction being ended they have no more connection with one another. An example of the latter is the indwelling normative principle which informs a living organism so that it grows to, and is maintained in, its distinctive form of life amidst all the changes of its environment; or again that impalpable and indefinable, but very real, something which we think of as the spirit of a community or nation or institution. Such a statement as "it is un-British to do so-and-so" (despite the horrible misuse to which it can be put) rests on the recognition of a normative factor within the national life which is really "there," impossible though it be to give it precise definition or exact location. It is an immanent norm, dwelling within and informing a people in a characteristic way, and having no existence apart from it. There are of course some explicit expressions of such a norm to which appeal can be made as occasion demands—the laws of a people, the constitutional practice written or unwritten which directs the form and process of its government, its historical records, its literature; all these are in some degree permanently and universally accessible, even as the standard-yard is permanently accessible in

the Mint in London. Nevertheless the norm, even in its written expressions, never becomes extrinsic to that which it is related, after the manner of the standard-yard: for no one can interpret and apply it rightly who does not himself share in the spirit of the people which it helps to create and foster, and such right interpretation will of course always at many points transcend the literal dictionary meaning of the written words.

#### THE BIBLE AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

Now the relation of the Bible to the Christian faith and life is obviously of this second or intrinsic type. The Bible is normative of that faith and life; nevertheless it can only be rightly used and interpreted in its normative function by those who livingly share in that faith and life, by those, that is to say, who share in the faith and life of the church; and the faith and life of the church, though it is inseparable from the biblical records, always transcends what is contained in or expressible through those records. There is nothing illogically circular in this relationship because the Bible as authoritative source and norm and the life and faith of the church are organically continuous with one another and form a single indivisible whole.

The question of the significance and authority of the Bible, then, can only be answered on the basis of our general understanding of that Christian faith and life with which it constitutes an organic unity. At first sight, that might appear to imply that nothing less than an exposition of the whole content of the faith is necessary to an understanding of the place of the Bible within it. But fortunately that is not so. Just because we are dealing with an organic whole and are particularly concerned with the normative factors within it, all that is required is a grasp of that central and controlling truth which imparts to the whole its specifically Christian character, distinguishing it once and for all from all other religious "wholes," no matter what partial identities and similarities there may otherwise be.

There can be no division of opinion as to what this central and controlling essence of the Christian faith and life is. It is the belief that in Jesus Christ the personal God himself, in a supreme and final act of saving self-disclosure and self-giving, came into, and is at work within, human history. This central belief of the Christian faith is usually spoken of as belief in the incarnation, but I have always felt that there is a certain inadequacy, and even perhaps something misleading in this term, from the point of view of grasping the distinctive essence of the Christian faith in Christ, and the way in which this faith is inseparably bound up with the Bible. The inadequacy of the word begins to appear when we take note of the statement which has often been made, usually with the implication that it discredits the Christian faith concerning Christ, that after all belief in

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a divine incarnation, a divine descent into human life in an embodied form is not peculiar to Christianity; such a belief, it is said, can be found in other religions, in Greece, in India and elsewhere. The statement is perfectly true if the word "incarnation" is taken in its narrowly literal, etymological meaning; but what is overlooked is that, so taken, the word fails to express the distinctively Christian faith concerning Christ. That faith would be much better expressed, at any rate for our purposes here, if we were to drop the word "incarnation" and, coining another, speak of the divine "inhistorization" in Christ.

What then does the word "inhistorization"—if we may be allowed to use it—express that the word "incarnation" fails to express, perhaps even obscures? We may make this clear by using a somewhat fantastic illustration.

#### INCARNATION OR "INHISTORIZATION"?

Suppose that I am dropped from an airplane into the midst of a savage people with the commission to lift them from their degraded life into something higher, and suppose that I have plenary power to effect whatsoever I will. How shall I go to work? I can do either of two things. On the one hand, I can bring into operation at once by over-riding force the higher form of life I represent, and in which I believe lies their salvation. I can break up their tribal organization, annul their traditions, prohibit their low moral code and primitive culture—in one gigantic upheaval pound everything to bits, and then force the bits, so to speak, into the mould I desire. Suppose that *per impossible* I succeed in doing this. Is it not clear that whilst I have actively entered into their life, I have not acted into their *history*, their very own history at all. For what I have done is to annihilate and negate their history and to substitute something entirely different in its place; there has been no continuity, only discontinuity; my action, so to say, has been "into" but not "in and through," down the vertical but not along the horizontal. My action might perhaps be compared to a bomb which drops from the sky and destroys my house; whilst in one sense the falling of the bomb is an event in the history of the house, in another sense it is not, for nothing in the previous history of the house has had anything to do with its fall, and the fall ends the house's history as a house.

The other possible line of action has already been indicated by contrast. Instead of annihilating the tribe's whole manner of life, I may seek a way of making myself one with it, of getting inside it and working from within, of recreating it by building on what is already there. The result will be that the new mode of life, though new, will still have the imprint of the tribe's own distinctive character upon it. There will have been saving action not merely vertically "into" their existence, but horizontally "*in and through*"

*their history. There will be continuity between the old and the new; the pattern will run on; the fabric will come off the loom in one piece; it will still be in a very real sense their history. Yet there will also be discontinuity; for my dropping from the heavens, and the message and the power which I bring, nothing in their previous history could have brought forth.*

The illustration is indeed fantastic and must not be pressed, though it might be pointed out that there is a historical parallel to the contrast of the two methods in the French Revolution and the criticism of it made by Edmund Burke. It was Burke's contention that the French Revolutionaries went hideously wrong because they supposed that they could abolish history and reconstruct human nature from the foundation; indeed d'Alembert had said quite explicitly "let us abolish history." But whether wholly fantastic or not, the illustration may serve its purpose. Broadly speaking, pagan incarnations correspond to the first of the two alternative lines of action; the divine being merely drops into the human scene in an embodied form from the realm of the immortals, unheralded, unprepared for, without roots in what has gone before or results in what comes after. The Christian faith in Christ, on the other hand, is obviously in line with the second alternative. It affirms, and always has affirmed, that the divine action in Christ is *both* action "in and through" *and* action "into," both horizontal and vertical at one and the same time; there is both continuity and discontinuity. There is *discontinuity* in that the advent of Christ marks a divine saving entry into history which is new and unique, an event which would not and could not have happened without God's deliberate will so to act at that particular point in time and in that particular way. But there is continuity in that Christ is nevertheless a fully historic, individuated human being, a Jew, his whole being and life rooted in, derivative from, incomprehensible except in the light of, the previous history of the Jewish people.

Now, it is evident that if full weight is given to *both* the "into" *and* the "in and through" aspects which the Christian faith thus predicates of the divine action in Christ, then it becomes necessary to include in the scope of that action much more than just the personal history of Christ in Palestine from B.C. 4 to A.D. 29, or whatever the correct dates may now be considered to be. It is necessary to include in some measure the whole series of related historical events with which his human life was inseparably bound up, and apart from which it would not and could not have been a truly historical, a truly human, life at all. Thus, it becomes necessary to include within the scope of the divine saving action in him the events in the previous history of Israel which led up to and made possible his advent; furthermore, it becomes necessary to include in it, in some measure, the persons and events in immediate relation with which his historic life was wrought out; and finally it becomes necessary to include in it that stream of events which

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flowed directly from his unique historic life, from his own express purpose and intention and from his creative saving impact on those to whom that purpose and intention were imparted, in other words, the coming into being and the continuing life of the Christian movement, the church. In other words, the distinctively Christian faith in the incarnation commits you to the very crucial and highly distinctive Christian concept of what the Germans call *Heilsgeschichte* or saving history, redemptive history. The phrase *Heilsgeschichte* or saving history conveniently sums up the distinctive Christian understanding of incarnation as "inhistorization" for which as I have said there is no parallel elsewhere; it conveniently sums up the "into" and the "in and through" aspects of the divine action in Christ.

On the basis of all this, it is not difficult for the preacher, and for his congregation for that matter, to see the reasonableness, indeed the necessity and inevitability of always relating the preaching of the distinctive Christian gospel to that collection of writings which we call the Bible. For the Bible confronts us with this saving history of which we have been speaking in a peculiarly living form, so that in reading the Bible we step as it were right into the unfolding process itself. It does this because the writings which constitute it are not history in the sense of a continuous prose narrative written up later by a historian who was not himself a participator in the unfolding of the events narrated, who indeed would probably regard his non-participation in them as a prime qualification to be a trustworthy historian at all. Rather what we have is a literature—prose narratives, legal codes, poetry, hymns, devotional writings, proverbs and maxims, letters, prophetic utterances, as these were produced, deposited (so to say) within the actual living process itself. We have interpretations of historical events which themselves become part of the historical events interpreted and help to determine the shape of what comes afterwards. The epistles of St. Paul, for example, are, well—*epistles*. They were *not* written for the purpose of finding a place in an authoritative Book. They were written to meet the actual situations which confronted the Christian faith as it went out into the world. They are, I repeat, part of the historical process itself, and that is in a measure true of all the biblical writings. When the preacher, then, takes his stand upon the Bible, he does no more than take his stand upon the central and distinctive Christian affirmation of the divine inhistorization in Christ, upon the unique Christian concept of the *Heilsgeschichte*; nay, in a sense, he takes his stand *within* the *Heilsgeschichte*. I once heard of a rather skeptical person, very modernistic in his outlook, being taken to a Presbyterian service; after the service he said that there was one thing in it which particularly jarred on him and that was the solemn carrying into the pulpit, just before the service began, of the pulpit Bible with its immense gilt-edged pages. He did not like, he said, being thus explicitly and

even ostentatiously fettered, right at the beginning, to this ancient literature; he did not like the suggestion of the worship being centred in a dead book. I do not know what answer was in fact given to him, but one right answer might well have been that he would not even begin to understand the distinctive essence of the Christian message and faith until he began to understand why the Bible was thus carried in and laid open upon the pulpit desk. For whatever else it signified, the act was a simple ritual expression of the truth of the "inhistorization" of God in Christ. And in this connection we may note again the difference between the concept of "incarnation" and the concept of "inhistorization." To assert that God acted "for us men and our salvation" through the incarnation is not necessarily the same thing as to assert the necessity for historical records concerning it. You might hold a doctrine of salvation which established or presupposed the necessity of the incarnation, but which made such records superfluous. There have in fact been doctrines of God's saving work in Christ of this type. Thus the view which finds expression in some of the writings of the Greek fathers, that the essence of Christ's saving work lay in the fact that there was introduced through him into the corrupt and perishing body of humanity the divine incorruptible life, whilst obviously asserting the necessity of the incarnation, leaves no indispensable place for "saving history," or for a collection of writings like the Bible. Similarly, certain types of substitutionary view of Christ's saving work, particularly when elaborated into a scheme of soteriological doctrine which a man must believe in order to be saved, do not seem indispensably to involve the sort of historical records we have in the Bible. On the other hand, it is extremely difficult to see how a soteriological doctrine which took the assertion of the divine "inhistorization," in the sense in which we have expounded that term, seriously, could do any other than include as an essential factor in the saving process some encounter with God through the inhistorization process itself, some encounter that is, with Christ as he is set before us through the Bible. This is a point which could obviously be developed at great length, but I must not turn aside to do that in a brief lecture of this kind.

#### CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY

Rather I would like to illustrate still further the extremely close and inseparable connection between the central Christian affirmation of the incarnation, or, better, the "inhistorization" of God and the Bible by asking you to take note of the way in which the "in and through" and "into," the "continuity" and "discontinuity" aspects of the divine action in Christ are in fact reflected in the whole structure and content of the Bible. Indeed, when you come to examine it, the Bible can be seen to be built up throughout, in a very striking way, on the "continuity-discontinuity" theme.

Thus, take first the Old Testament. The picture of the people of Israel with which the Old Testament presents us through the wide variety of its contents is manifestly the picture of a people whose life is *continuous* with the life of mankind generally. This is true in the first place in respect of the ordinary human nature of the persons concerned. To enter into the world of ancient Israel as it is set before us in the pages of the Old Testament is to enter the same world of human actions and motives, loves and hates, passions and sins, hopes and fears, as we ourselves know. This is one reason why the Old Testament can be made to come alive for, and speak to, modern men by any preacher who knows his job. In the second place it is true also in respect of the forces which play upon Israel as a nation and determine the course of its history. To understand the history of Israel it is as necessary to take note of the economic, social, political, international forces operating in the ancient world as it would be to understand the history of any other people of that time: we must know something about Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Rome, of Sennacherib, Cyrus, Darius, and Alexander. The history of Israel as set forth in the Old Testament thus takes its place in and is continuous with what may be called the wider secular history of mankind, and can indeed be studied by the methods of ordinary historical enquiry.

On the other hand, the picture is equally, and indeed much more, the picture of a people whose life is profoundly discontinuous with the life of the rest of mankind. This discontinuity comes to expression in the quite distinctive religious idea and experience of "the covenant." The word "covenant" in the Old Testament signifies a relationship of a personal and ethical kind which God, who has all peoples and all history in his grasp, has entered into with Israel and with Israel alone, in order to fulfil his saving purpose in the world. God himself has taken the initiative in setting up this relationship, which, because it is set up with Israel only, puts that people, in respect of the forces which determine its history, in a position of radical *discontinuity* with the rest of the world. It is a people apart, and yet as we have seen it is in another sense not a people apart, for its life and history are still embedded in the general life and history of mankind.

Consider, next, the relation between the Old Testament and the New. Here the Bible exhibits to us a new, and even more deep-going continuity-discontinuity relationship. The continuity between the Old Testament and the New is indicated by the use of the word "testament," which is of course equivalent to the word covenant, in both. That the word "covenant" or "testament" should thus cover the whole content of the Bible indicates that the biblical history is set before us as concerned throughout with essentially the same community constituted as such in the midst of mankind (though not apart from mankind) by the saving "in-historizing" purpose of God.

This, of course, gives to the Bible, despite the multiplicity and variety of its contents, and above all, despite the break between the Old and New Testaments, an indiscerptible unity and continuity. The New Testament writings set forth the church as the new Israel of God, the people of the new covenant, and if the main emphasis is on the word "new" that is because the unbroken continuity with what had gone before, which is implicit in the words "Israel" and "covenant" was not felt to require any emphasis; it was assumed. Quietly and without argument the New Testament writers serve themselves heir to the "commonwealth of Israel" and the "covenants of promise." The new covenant community is not a substitute for the old covenant community, it is its continuance; it is its continuance because the divine purpose of "inhistorization" which laid hold of Israel in the beginning, and constituted it the covenant people for the salvation of the world, still grasps it under the form of the church.

The profound discontinuity on the other hand between the two testaments is expressed by the term "new" in contrast with the term "old," as I have already indicated. The radical nature of this discontinuity, this newness, is of course bound up with the New Testament faith concerning Christ, namely, that in him God acted into the history of the covenant people, and therefore through them into the history of the world, for the salvation of mankind, in an utterly new and unique way. By virtue of his unique and mysterious office as the Messiah, Christ is the redeeming, covenant-making God himself present and in action to set up his kingdom. The new covenant community is new, utterly new and discontinuous, because Christ is utterly new and discontinuous; yet it is also fully continuous with the old covenant community, just as Christ himself as a historic person, a first century Jew, is continuous with the old covenant community, into the midst of which he was born. And here perhaps we may note how this continuity-discontinuity aspect of Christ finds expression in the New Testament in the story of the virgin birth. Our Lord's birth of a Jewish woman signifies the continuity; his birth of the Holy Ghost in the plainest possible way signifies the discontinuity.

Turning now to the life of the new covenant community itself as set before us in the New Testament, we observe the same continuity-discontinuity principle at work. The life of the new Israel, the new covenant people, like that of the old Israel, is manifestly continuous with the life of mankind generally, subject to the same general conditions, under necessity to take note of and adjust itself to the same facts and forces, liable to the same sins and weaknesses and failures, exposed to the same frustrations and losses and bitter disappointments of man's historical existence. Yet also there is set forth a most profound discontinuity, the nature of which is hidden from all except those who through faith in Christ are incorporated into the new

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community. This discontinuity consists in the fact that there is all the time entering "into" and working "in and through" the being and life of the church the same saving purpose of God as that which was at work in ancient Israel from the beginning, except that now it has reached its consummation in Christ. Here, of course, there comes into view the distinctive New Testament faith that Christ is the risen, living, and ever present head of the new covenant community; as such he is, through the Holy Spirit, ever operative in the hearts and lives of its members constituting them his body, the organ and instrument of its saving purpose in him. But we must leave these profound doctrines on one side. The point is that the new community is in history, is continuous with history, has a part to play in history; but the source of its real life, its distinctive life, lies beyond history in God. It is hid with Christ in God.

I hope that these remarks, somewhat dull I fear, will have served to emphasize again the main point, namely, that the central Christian affirmation of the incarnation, or rather the "inhistorization" of God in Christ, with its insistence that the divine action is both "in and through" and "into," both continuous and discontinuous with, history is intimately and indissolubly bound up with the whole distinctive content and structure of the Bible. They may have served also to illustrate and confirm the assertion made earlier that the normative relation of the Bible to the faith and life of the church is of the intrinsic and organic kind. The faith and life of the church as centered in God's unique action in Christ can in fact no more be torn apart from the Bible and remain their distinctive selves than the plant can be torn from the soil and remain a living plant. And all of this comes to expression in church practice by the preacher always preaching from the Bible, and in church ritual by the solemn carrying in of the Bible at the beginning of worship, and the opening of it upon the preacher's desk in full view of the worshippers.

#### WHY PREACH FROM THE BIBLE ONLY?

In conclusion I take up this question: it may be asked why, in view of all that has been said *should* preaching be *confined* to the contents of the Bible. That it should be related to and built on the Bible is evident; but why restricted to it? Surely, it may be urged, if saving history issues in the coming into existence and continuance of the new covenant community, indwelt and ruled by the risen and living Christ through the Holy Spirit and used by him as the instrument and agent of his redemptive purpose in the world, then in a very real sense "saving history" is still going on. And that being so, why should not the preacher preach, if he will, from writings of high inspiration which are *later* than those contained in the Bible and which have been produced as part of this ongoing saving history, part of this on-

going life of the new covenant community? Why should he not preach from any of the great Christian classics, as may best serve his purpose of setting forth the unsearchable riches of Christ?

The answer to this natural question, requires first an understanding of the principle which determines the limits of the biblical canon. Let us take a look at this.

So far as the limits of the Old Testament canon are concerned there is obviously no problem, for the advent of Christ himself put a final limit to the old covenant history considered as preparatory to that advent. There cannot, therefore, be any more candidates for admission to the Old Testament canon, except in the extremely remote contingency of another manuscript belonging to the Old Testament period being discovered. The only question which might be considered to remain now open is whether the Protestant churches have been wise in excluding from the Old Testament canon those books of the so-called Apocrypha which help to bridge the gap between the two testaments and so to give knowledge of the history of the covenant people immediately prior to the coming of Christ himself.

With the New Testament, the situation is obviously different. If we are to understand the limits of the New Testament canon, we must go back to what was said earlier in this lecture concerning the necessity to include within the divine saving action in Christ much more than the person of Christ. We said, it may be recalled, that we must include within it in some measure the persons and events in immediate relation to which his life, death and resurrection were wrought out and the new saving revelation made. If we do not thus widen the scope of the divine action, we must suppose either that it was a matter of chance whether the revelation in Christ would prove effective as a saving revelation, or that its effectiveness was independent of genuine historical conditions, in other words, that there was no real incarnation or "inhistorization" at all. The question is, in what measure must we include in the divine saving action the human persons and events in relation to which the life of the Redeemer was wrought out? This raises some formidable problems particularly in relation to the doctrine of providence, but if we confine our interest to the bringing into existence of the new covenant community, then it is clear, that, if this was to be accomplished it was necessary that the divine action should include the provision of men who would not only keep company with Christ in the actual unfolding of his historic life, death and resurrection, but also discern the transcendent meaning of these events and be sent forth to bear witness to it. The calling of such men and the quickening of their minds and hearts to fulfil the calling we can only think of as the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit. As Christ himself said when Peter confessed his messiahship: "Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven."

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But whatever the mystery of the divine working, the indispensability of such men is obvious. Only in their response does the divine intention and act of revelation in Christ complete itself. So the first apostles come into view as essentially involved in the process of a historic incarnation and revelation. The word "apostle" in New Testament usage is nowhere exactly defined, but it is clear that in essence it signifies precisely those who were called to play this crucial part in the divine "in-historizing" action in Christ. The best description of their function is given in the First Epistle of John: "that which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled of the Word of life . . . that which we have seen and heard declare we unto you." And St. Paul writes: "Am not *I* an apostle? . . . have *I* not seen Jesus Christ our Lord?"

The first apostles then stand in a wholly distinctive position within the divine saving activity in Christ and in the bringing into existence of the new covenant community. They participate in the event of the incarnation, the "in-historization," and it is an essential element of that participation that they are sent into the world to declare it. "As my Father hath sent me, so send I you"—Christ and the apostles constitute a single continuous apostolic activity of God. The declaration had to be in the first instance oral—the preaching of the gospel—but it is evident that if any of the apostolic circle gave any sort of expression to the message in writing, or was the immediate source or inspiration of such writing, the writing in question would have a quite special significance and status. It would itself be part of, an immediate deposit of, the great originative in-historizing event itself, and no writing subsequently produced by others could ever have the same status.

It was therefore a wholly right instinct which led the church in course of time to formulate the principle that from among the writings which the general mind of the Christian community was finding to be valuable only those should be finally admitted to the canon which were apostolic in origin. But, of course, this right criterion of apostolicity having been thus laid down and the limitation of the canon justified, it still remains an open question whether in fact the criterion was rightly applied, but into that we cannot enter here. But I think we may say that on the whole the church did decide rightly. Broadly speaking the New Testament *is* an apostolic book and shares in the unique status of the apostolic circle in relation to the "in-historization" of God in Christ. In the New Testament as a whole we do find ourselves confronting the historic person of the Redeemer in his unique creative and recreative impact upon men, in his bringing into existence the new covenant community and sending it and empowering it to bear witness to him; we find ourselves confronting him in a way in which we do not confront him in other early writings of the church, not to speak of those that come later, no matter how beautiful and helpful they may be.

All this, I think, gives adequate enough reason for the preacher to find it reasonable and satisfying to follow the age-long tradition of the church and base his preaching on the Bible and not on later Christian writings even though they have attained the status of being recognized Christian classics, and in a sense are themselves the deposit of "saving history." If our desire is to hear and to declare God's word to us in Christ, and to keep from straying into the darkness and untruth into which our only partly regenerate nature is always ready to beguile us, and from which Christ came to deliver us, we must always begin with the New Testament and to it we must ever return, for that is but to begin with Christ and to return to him. On the other hand, it would be foolish, it seems to me, to lay down a strict regulation that a preacher must always take a scriptural text or passage as the basis of his discourse. We must preserve the liberty of prophesying. But even so, it remains true that, wherever the preacher may begin and whatever he may say, his message must ultimately be derived from and controlled by the divine revelation in history in Christ, and that means derived from and controlled by what is in the Bible and especially in the New Testament. Behind and within the preaching there must be a deliberate and sincere yoking of the mind to the Bible, even if there should be at no point an explicit reference to a Scripture passage or text.

This leads me to the last point. The line of thought we have been following surely makes clear that the act of preaching from the Bible is very inadequately, indeed misleadingly, described as preaching from a collection of ancient documents. For our argument has been that the Bible and the church constitute an indissoluble organic unity, the unity being grounded in the fact of the *Heilsgeschichte*, the saving history, which saving history is still in a sense going on in the *present* life of the new covenant community, the church. The church is a living contemporary fact, as contemporary, if I may so put it, as any other fact in the modern world, and the Bible, because it is organically one with it in the way I have tried to indicate, becomes in a very real sense contemporary in and through it, and so ceases to be *merely* a collection of antique writings. From the point of view of the task of the preacher, we may put it like this: in his preparation for preaching and in the act of preaching, the movement of the preacher is never merely from the Bible to the church, but is also always and just as much from the church to the Bible (even if he is not explicitly aware of it), for church and Bible, I repeat, are inseparably one and are therefore contemporary together.

This, I suppose, carries with it the implication that the effectiveness of preaching depends, to a not negligible degree, on the quality of the life of the church as a contemporary community of persons continuous with and relating itself to the contemporary world and its problems, whilst at the same time discontinuous with these in respect of the source of that life. But

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that is an implication which we must face and accept, for indeed it is in manifest accord with the facts. We began by speaking of the problem of communication, of the need to translate the biblical message into modern terms, one aspect of which need Bultmann has especially emphasized in his demand for the "demythologizing" of the Bible. I certainly have no wish to minimize this problem, nor the strenuous thinking it requires from the preacher today if it is to be met; but it will be well always to remind ourselves, especially those of us who are not called to preach, that a crucial factor in the communication of the Christian message to men in *any* age always has been, and always will be, the quality of the life of the church as it participates in the contemporary historical process itself. To say this is not merely to utter a truism, a pious and sentimental platitude, nor is it to provide the preacher with an excuse for avoiding the strenuous labor, just referred to, of expressing the message in relevant modern terms (for his success or non-success in this will itself play some part in determining the quality of the church's life); it is rather to exhibit once again the distinctive nature of the Christian faith concerning the "inhistorization" of God in Christ, and, derivatively from that, concerning the relation of the Bible to the church's being and life, and to the preaching of the word.