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Jesus Christ Yesterday: Further Notes on the Historicity of the Kerygma

E.C. Blackman

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I

It has been argued in a previous article¹ that if the balance in study of the Gospels is to be fairly poised, more allowance needs to be made for the historicity of Jesus, that is, for the fact that Jesus really was a historical person. The category of the Jesus of History is still a valid one, but has to be brought into relation with the Christ of Faith or of the Kerygma. The Kerygma in fact is not rightly evaluated apart from its presupposition that its Messiah had actually lived and died. To venture a Shakespearian analogy, he is comparable not to Hamlet or Lear but to Henry V. His life and its consequence is the world's greatest drama, but he, the central figure, is not a dramatic creation but a historical person.²

This fact does not carry with it the assumption that we can reconstruct anything like a full presentation of the course of his ministry, let alone a proper biography. Form Criticism has made this clear enough. To deny that some incident in Mark happened precisely as recorded is not necessarily to deny faith, but may be the beginning of a true understanding of the faith out of which such incidents were moulded and formulated. The Jesus of the Gospels was a real man; our faith is not based on myth or fiction. But this does not involve the factual correctness in detail of every incident recorded about him.

When all this is said, however, we must plead that the radical historical scepticism and subordination of history to eschatology which is evident in the first pioneers of Form Criticism is not essential to a critical treatment of the Gospels. We may illustrate by a quotation from Bultmann, this time from his *Theology of the New Testament*:³

The revelation of God in Jesus was not an event in the history of the People, to which one could look back as to Moses' history, the exodus.... The 'new covenant,' unlike the old, is not the founding event of a people's history, but, however much it arises from a historical event, the death of Jesus, it is nonetheless an eschatological event, and the "People of God" with which the covenant

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is made is an entity not of world history but of eschatology.... For Christ is the end of history....

Bultmann has to admit that in some places New Testament authors forget this eschatological sense, most noticeably Luke, who attempted more seriously than the other three Evangelists

¹ E. C. Blackman, "Jesus Christ Yesterday: The Historical Basis of the Christian Faith," *Canadian Journal of Theology*, Vol. 7 (1961), pp. 118-127 [online at http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/jesus-1_blackman.pdf].

² For confirmation, see the recent Inaugural Lecture by Professor W. D. Davies at Union Theological Seminary, New York (*Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, Jan. 1960), where it is argued that the quest of the historical Jesus must go on and that the Gospels do provide material for it.

³ Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner, 1951-55), Vol. II, p. 122.

to write a *life* of Jesus and place it in a world-historical setting (cf. Luke 1:1-4, 2:1-3, 3:1-2), and even to continue this in a history of the Church. In Bultmann's judgment this only shows how little Luke shared the basic self-consciousness of the earliest Christians: "He has surrendered the original kerygmatic sense of the Jesus tradition and has historized it."⁴ Do we agree with Bultmann that such historizing or de-eschatologizing was a secularist misunderstanding at a vital point—and that Gnosticism was to some extent justified in denying such historization of an original creative event that was essentially eschatological? Must we not rather affirm that Luke was right in taking the historical factor as seriously as he did? For Luke the One who was the fulfilment of the hopes of the ages (Luke 24:27) had to be recognized as also a historical figure; otherwise the Christian faith had no truth, not even the truth of the best myths, but was simply nonsense (*leros*, Luke 24:12). The rightness of this emphasis should be admitted and kept to the fore in the present-day discussion. There is no more point now than there was then in proclaiming resurrection except in the case of one who had actually lived as a mortal.

We may refer to a recent book by Professor Conzelmann of Zürich,⁵ which argues that Luke understood Jesus' ministry not as a mere prelude to the End but as a part of history, in fact as the centre of history when seen in its aspect of God's saving activity; for it is intermediate between God's dealing with Israel (era of Law) and God's dealing with the Christian Church (era of the Spirit). The "today" of Luke 4:21 as it were brings eschatology into the course of history, though the Eschaton in the sense of the full experience of salvation is still regarded as future, and so is distinguished from the course of history. The ministry of Jesus, though it may be said to signify the start of the "time" of salvation, is not the impartation of salvation but a "foretaste" or "image" of it. The fall of Jerusalem, which was connected with Eschaton by Jesus and the most primitive Church, becomes in Luke's writings a historical event. Similarly the Spirit is understood by Luke not simply as a sign of the End, but as the power directing the Church in its witness to the world, i.e., as a continuing factor in history (cf. Acts 1:4-8).⁶

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Among the many points that call for attention when the historicity of the Gospels is fully argued, the following may be briefly touched on here.

(a) The difference between the Passion narratives of the Gospels and references to the Passion in passages like Romans 3:25f. or Philippians 2:6-8 must be recognized. In the Gospels the concern is for an account—plus an element of interpretation admittedly, for example in Luke 24 and John 21—of the steps by which Jesus was led to his death: Temple debates, mounting criticism, the decision of the Jewish authorities to have him put away as dangerous to the equilibrium of their concordat with Rome, the defection of one disciple and the arrest timed and arranged on information released by this traitor, examination by the Sanhedrin and by the

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 117. In fairness to Bultmann we must remember his note on John 5:19: "The coming of the Revealer is the emergence of a particular historical person in a particular (piece of) History" (*Das Evangelium des Johannes*, 12th ed. [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht, 1952], p. 189).

⁵ Conzelmann, *The Theology of Luke* (London: Faber, 1960).

⁶ For the special significance of Luke we may note also C. K. Barrett, *Luke the Historian in Recent Study* (London: Epworth Press, 1961). Cf. p. 57f.: Christ "is not the close of all history, but the starting-point of a new kind of history, ... Church History.... This is what Luke perceived, and this is what gives him his unique place in the New Testament. He is the father of Church History; it had not occurred to any Christian before him that there was any such thing." Oscar Cullmann's emphasis on Jesus as the mid-point of time will be familiar to our readers.

Roman procurator. Passages outside the Gospels, on the other hand, are concerned solely with the theological significance of these events, mostly considered as a whole, as the salvific intervention of God in Christ. This is clearly *marturia*, the Church's witness to and comment on the basic data that made it a believing community; it is not historical recording. We are not contending that this *marturia* is absent from the Gospels; what we are contending is that the more definitely historical element is to be found in the Gospels, with varying craft of presentation, even in John's Gospel, the most theological of the four. This has not been sufficiently allowed for in Form Criticism.

(b) Or take the Transfiguration. This is best interpreted not as a post-resurrection appearance, but as an experience of Jesus during his ministry, indicating that he moves in heavenly as well as earthly company, and that his proper environment is the transcendent glory rather than the fishing boats and common streets of this earth. Jesus' contemporaries are not only Peter and James and John, but Moses and Elijah. The incident is none the less capable of being regarded as an event in the earthly experience of the Lord, in which three intimate disciples had some share. Here more than in most places in the Gospels theology dominates history; but the historical root is not to be denied. Bornkamm's view that the meaning of the Transfiguration only begins to appear when we refuse to raise the question of what actually happened should be rejected as a cutting, rather than an untying, of the Gordian knot.⁷

(c) Outside the Gospels, the significance of Acts 2:22 must not be missed. The fact that a reference to the pre-Passion period of the ministry is there at all, as well as to Passion and Resurrection in the Kerygma, is very significant. It means that the historic life of Jesus was not ignored. We may refer to Acts 3:13, where the less explicit reference to the historic life may be interpreted as an earlier Christology.⁸ There is more definite support for

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2:22 in the later Petrine speech 10:38. Whether these speeches are genuine collections of what was said by the chief apostle in those early days, or only the Kerygmatic theology of the author of Acts, does not affect my argument here. The point is that the setting of the Gospel events in history was recognized.⁹

(d) We may note the contrast in Paul, where this element is absent. Paul's Christology—at least as expressed in his correspondence—must be pronounced defective at this point. If we are prepared to admit this, we need not labour at a defensive exegesis of 2 Cor. 5:16b ("though we have known Christ according to the flesh, henceforth we no longer know him so"). It will of course be recognized that the problem of communicating Christ to unbelievers

⁷ Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Harper, 1960), p. 173. For recent discussion, see C. E. Carlson, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 80 (1961), pp. 233-40. There it is argued that, although the original place of the Transfiguration is among the Resurrection appearances, nevertheless its "pre-dating" is significant. Its present position in our Gospels "reflects the conviction that the Christ of the kerygma was not fundamentally different from the historical Jesus" (p. 240). A. Schweitzer assigned the Transfiguration to the course of the ministry, as a common ecstatic experience of Jesus and his followers at a time when they were in a state of intense eschatological expectation.

⁸ Cf. J. A. T. Robinson, "The Most Primitive Christology of All?", *Journal of Theological Studies*, N.S., vol. 7 (1961), pp. 177-189.

⁹ Bultmann, in his *Theology of the New Testament*, regards the paucity of references to Jesus' life outside the Gospels as due simply to lack of interest and to the conviction that Christ is the end of history. In his view, this explains 2 Cor. 5:16, and also St. John's independent treatment of the tradition. Cf. Vol. I, pp. 188f., 238f., 293f.; Vol. II, 3ff., 69.

involves us today in difficulties of a different order from those in which Paul was involved. We cannot ignore the historic factor as he apparently could (cf. 2 Cor. 5:16). Paul, in his situation, had to contend for the saving power of Christ by contrast with what Judaism and the redeemers of Hellenism offered. The modern preacher has to maintain the historic reality of Christ before a world secularized beyond comparison with the world of the New Testament, in a generation that prefers ideologies to metaphysics and will give credence only to scientific data and concrete factuality.

II

The foregoing argument of this essay and its predecessor may appear to be too much influenced by Ranke's famous rule that the main business of the historian is the establishment of the original facts "as they actually happened." This is today regarded as too narrow and pedestrian an aim in historiography, and it may indeed be unattainable. But certainly it should be kept in view if historical writing is not to degenerate into propaganda. All historians are selective, and we may be thankful if their principle of selection is a reputable principle or conviction, and not a prejudice. If it is a life they choose to deal with, they will not attempt to reproduce every known fact about the person from the cradle to the grave, but only the facts that strike them as significant and as relevant to the time in which they (and their readers) live. Great indeed is the historian whose selective principle continues to seem important long after his contemporaries have died.¹⁰

This point has a bearing on the Gospel writers. They too are not exempt from the criticism that may fairly be levelled at historians. Their purpose was not to lay bare the events of the life of Jesus of Nazareth as objectively as possible. They had a different concern, viz., to make credible to their

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readers that his life was no ordinary human life, but one in which divine power was operative to an unprecedented degree. This may not commend itself to all as a worthy aim. The secularist is alienated at the start. But the line of justifiable criticism should not begin from the premise that no historian does that kind of thing at all. The historian is concerned for facts and events and their causes, as Ranke urged, but he cannot be indifferent to meaning and interpretation, nor can he entirely avoid presupposing some *Weltanschauung* and common interest in his readers.¹¹

It should be admitted that the Evangelists are not properly called historians or biographers. But at the same time it should be asserted that the life they record, even though related to God, was nevertheless a real human life and a part of history. If they had not believed that, they would not have written. There would then have been no Christianity to break from Judaism and to challenge the other religions of the ancient world—or to survive into the modern world.

¹⁰ H. A. L. Fisher's *History of Europe*, recently reissued by Fontana Books (2 vols., London: Collins, 1960), is less welcome now than it was in the 1920s, because what is accepted as axiomatic in the 1960s is different from the tacit assumptions of 1920. For instance, we can no longer assume the superiority of Western Europe, and we have different questions in mind as we approach the past.

¹¹ On all this, see the acute study by T. A. Roberts, *History and Christian Apologetic* (London: S.P.C.K., 1960), especially ch. 1 on historical methodology.

It is not only the advocates of form-critical method who become insensitive to the historical rootage of our faith. There are many variations in the treatment of Christianity as essentially God's dealing with man that seem to avoid taking seriously the fact that this divine-human encounter was made possible by one who had actually been man. Professor G. J. Sirks of Leiden, for example, though critical of both Bultmann and Barth, can speak of "breaking through" history and establishing contact with God in Christian worship and service of one's fellow.¹² Since the Renaissance, history and theology are no longer related to one another but go their own independent ways, each with its own presuppositions and standards of judgment. Ought Christianity to be able to provide a link by working out a theology that is rooted in history? Barth¹³ and Daniélou¹⁴ have affirmed this, each arguing in characteristic fashion that the Christian faith points to "true" history; only when there is apprehension of revelation, that is, of God acting in history, does a satisfactory writing and concept of history become possible. If it is admitted that what is really happening to nations and individuals is God's dealing with them (the main theme of the Bible) the argument becomes intelligible and weighty. It is supported by Professor McIntyre's treatment of the Incarnation as God's full identification of himself with history.¹⁵ God is in it all the time, so to speak, not just occasionally; and the human life of Christ is not to be understood simply as one of several isolated interventions.

But the real problem is not the nature of history, nor even whether the historic events significant for Christians make possible a new conception of history that the secular historian may find meaningful. The great deside-

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ration in the present Christological exposition of the New Testament is to bring out with proper emphasis the truth that there has been revelation in history. Christ was God's representative on earth. His particular human life embodied something of eternal being and absolute significance that is unique among the things historians have to record. This emphasis on uniqueness may seem ridiculous and philosophically unjustifiable. It is arguable from a secularist standpoint that either all events are unique, or none are. But if this uniqueness concerning the historic life of Christ is not affirmed and kept in the forefront of Christological discussion one of the central tenets of the faith of the New Testament has been jettisoned. The confidence, not to say intransigence, of passages like Acts 4:12 or John 1:14-18 must be fully pondered. When it is ignored or by-passed it means that the faith in the Incarnation is reduced to a general transcendentalism that gives equal validity to the claims of prophets and mystics to be in communion with God. Thus no distinctive place is left for Christ as revealer and mediator. He is thought of as merely the catalyst that causes man's spiritual awakening. This is really a new form of Gnosticism, depreciating the relativities of history in comparison with eternal verities. Epochs do not matter; the past is revived in the present; one outstanding figure is no more significant than another. Even those philosophers who attempt to take history more seriously than this (e.g., Croce) appear to value history mainly for what it yields

¹² G. J. Sicks, *Spoorzoeken in het nieuwe Testament* (Arnhem: Van Loghum Slaterus, 1957), pp. 90-97.

¹³ K. Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, Vol. III/1 (Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1945), p. 41.

¹⁴ Daniélou, *The Lord of History* (London: Longmans, 1958).

¹⁵ McIntyre, *The Christian Doctrine of History* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1957).

in the way of self-knowledge. According to R. G. Collingwood history teaches "what man has done and thus what man is."¹⁶

Interest in and concern for the historical rootage of the Gospel is embedded in the primitive Kerygma. The distinctive nature of the Christian Kerygma requires this legitimation in concrete events. We are not saved by any fact of history, not even by Christ simply as historical. We are saved by the action of God. But the God we worship as Saviour is one who made himself known in events of history and thus came so close to human life as to be actually involved in it, in the human life of Jesus of Nazareth. Such a historically energizing Redeemer is the object of the faith of Christians. And the *Sitz im Leden* of this doctrine is not simply the first believing Christians and their Kerygma, but the life of Jesus, including of course his death, and culminating in his resurrection. Unless we insist on this we are not differentiating Christianity from Judaism, or from any mysticism that claims to make possible direct contact with God.¹⁷ Apart from this insistence, our conception of God is just as much in need of validation as any other intellectual concept. To quote Althaus's recent book: "The Gospel's foundation in history is a part of its credibility."¹⁸

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For this reason the effort to get back to the historical Jesus must be maintained. By this is meant not merely reconstructing the life of Jesus, considered as a series of events located at certain places and times, but penetrating through the sources to the real person and teaching of Jesus; in other words, uncovering it out of the *Gemeindetheologie* and later adaptation which overlays it in the Gospels as we have them.¹⁹ For this purpose historico-critical treatment of the Gospels is both justified and necessary. The ultimate goal, however, is not the critical procedure, but the recovery of the original words and Person of the Lord, which are the fountainhead of all that was later derived from him in the experience of his believing followers, from the first generation to the present.

This is to affirm a centrality for Christ in the Bible that goes far deeper than simple quotation of his words and acts, i.e., the original impact on his contemporaries, which may—or may not—be significant for modern Christians. Take for instance the famous saying, "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Matt. 5:9)—an indubitably authentic utterance of Jesus. But we harassed moderns cannot simply quote it in our Sunday services; we have to ask ourselves on Monday whether this means Mr. Kennedy rather than Mr. Khrushchev or Mr. Khrushchev rather than Mr. Kennedy, or both, or someone else more than either of these. And is this word of Jesus relevant to the modern issue at all, and if so, in what sense? Did Jesus mean by peace what the modern world does, in reference to the possibility of international conflict?

Our concern is for the original deeds and words of Jesus, not merely as evidence of what his example and command were for his first audiences, but in their perennial significance. The

¹⁶ R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 10. Italics mine.

¹⁷ From Hinduism, for example, which despises temporality and regards Christianity as inferior for the very reason that it is concerned with historical events. What is rooted in time loses any claim to contact with the timeless and eternally true. Reality is atemporal and apersonal.

¹⁸ Althaus, *The So-Called Kerygma and the Historical Jesus* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1959), p. 34. See also a recent essay by Nels Ferre (London Missionary Society, "Essays in Mission," No. 2 [1960]), p. 21: "Unless God came into history conclusively, man cannot be saved in and beyond history."

¹⁹ A splendid example of how this penetrating back should be carried out is C. H. Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet, 1935).

attempt to show this in a full reinterpretation of the ministry of Jesus is the main distinctive feature of St. John's Gospel. To quote Dodd's verdict on this aspect of the Gospel: "The gospel is a record of a life which expresses the eternal thought of God, the meaning of the universe."²⁰

Let us consider two aspects of the ministry, leaving aside the significance of the Cross and Resurrection, which obviously receive the greatest stress in all four Gospels. First, let us look at the teaching about the Kingdom, which was the central theme of Jesus' discourse. The kingdom in some sense "arrived" with Jesus; most scholars agree on this, though there is still debate as to how far Jesus thought of it as still future. But even if Jesus did not go so far as to announce the actual coming of the kingdom, his confronting of his hearers with its reality as imminent has sufficient distinctiveness in it to constitute a factor that contemporary Judaism could not assimilate. It was an overplus too big for any one generation. Jesus presented his contemporaries with new truth and new spiritual dynamic more potent than old

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wineskins could safely hold. It would need the perception and spiritual receptiveness of all future generations of both Jews and Gentiles. This is what the impact of Jesus upon the Palestinian Judaism of A.D. 29 was like—a more challenging impact than that of the Qumran community!

Secondly, consider a lesser aspect of the ministry: his relation to critics and opponents. This looms quite as large in the Gospels, particularly in that of John, as his relationship to disciples. We should learn from it that the significance of Jesus is not for Christians only, but for the whole of mankind; he is mankind's Lord and Saviour, whether they acknowledge it or not. This is the full challenge of the doctrine of Christ's lordship.

In denouncing Pharisees and Sadducees, Jesus was challenging the established leaders of the highest religion the world had seen. He did not do that lightly. They were not criminals or perverts or timeservers. They were good people, some no doubt rather frighteningly good. No one could be more serious than they about living up to an ideal. In their Law they had the ideal for human living; who could dare to criticize that? Only a blasphemer or a moral iconoclast—*or* one who in his very nature stood above all ideals, one who was to be called by his greatest interpreter "the end of Law." This was the authority by which Jesus debated with the authorities of the Judaism of his day, not in arrogance, as they thought, but as a superior who knew himself to be offering something new in the way of revelation, something unprecedented concerning God and man that went beyond all previously accepted knowledge and standards. Not all would receive it, least of all those who believed themselves to be in possession of the highest revelation; the good would be the enemy of the best. This was Jesus' dilemma as he faced his fellow Jews in synagogues and Temple. It is also the measure by which he transcended them and their conception of morality and religion. He bestrode that narrow world like a Colossus. Something greater than Solomon and something greater than the Temple was there.

Thus the Jesus of history who emerges from our reading of the Gospels is not merely the teacher of Galilee and Jerusalem. We find ourselves confronted with a challenging figure who was too big for that generation, and is too big for all generations. He has become the Christ of

²⁰ Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: University Press, 1953), p. 284.

faith. We worship and adore and therein confess that for us today something greater than idealism or communism or pacifism is here—something greater even than Christianity as the centuries hitherto have known it.

III

Christians do not need to import from secular historiography a concept of history and its meaning. That might entail (though not necessarily) a secularization of thinking. What the Christian does have an obligation to do is to make clear, and put right in the centre of his thinking, the affirmation that God has acted in history; in other words, that God is not an eternal being quite remote from the world, a sheerly transcendent Absolute, no

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more revealed in one particular event than in another. If this is "mythology" we must admit it, and continue to affirm that this part of the "myth" is essential and cannot be demythologized. As Professor McIntyre of Edinburgh says: "The temptation to de-historicise theological thinking appears still to be a real one."²¹ The conviction of the rootedness of Christianity in history commits us (McIntyre argues) to a "quite specific doctrine of history," i.e., of the historical process itself, not simply of men's varying interpretations of it. "The Incarnation makes history what the Christian believes history to be."²²

A distinction must be drawn between what I have called, in the case of of the Gospel-writers, historical concern, and factual accuracy. In our plea for an understanding of the Gospel as rooted in something that happened, it has to be admitted that the historical details of that happening cannot be fully reconstructed. But this does not make the Gospel a myth. Substantially the Gospels are historical sources, yielding knowledge of a life that was in the fullest sense real and actual. The security of our faith depends, not on the amount of factual knowledge we possess about Jesus as a man, but on the fact that he was a man.²³ On this historical actuality of the human life of Jesus the Gospels leave us in no doubt. It is this insistence on the significance of a particular life that differentiates them from much non-Christian religious literature. This ascription of unique significance to a particular life has been called the "scandal of particularity."²⁴ Our faith is a historical faith, and He whom we worship was a Palestinian Jew who lived in the ancient Roman Empire between the years 7 B.c. and A.D. 30. However much we stress his divinity we must always see it as rooted in the reality of earthly existence. Otherwise it is no more credible than the divinity of Hermes or Krishna, or than the general notion of a Messiah. Not so have we learned Christ.

²¹ McIntyre, *The Christian Doctrine of History*, p. 11.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 46.

²³ Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's remark in *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Fontana Books, London: Collins, 1960), p. 130: "If this earth was good enough for the man Jesus Christ, if a man like him really lived in it, then, and only then, has life a meaning for us. If Jesus had not lived, then our life... would be without meaning."

²⁴ Nels Ferre (in "Essays in Mission," No. 2) argues that this particularity is no scandal, but is possible and congruous for God in the sovereign freedom of his love. "Love is not limited by being locally present ... but is thereby expressed and fulfilled" (p. 16). "For God who is holy Love such a choice of his freedom is completely in character" (p. 19). He speaks of "the stark historicity of God's work in Christ" (p. 20). "The ampler our dimension of understanding the greatness of God, the sharper we need to see his Incarnation in the Christ" (p. 30).

Christ in his self-presentation as Jesus of Nazareth became for us men the very revelation of God, apart from which we remain—in Paul's devastating phrase about unredeemed humanity—"godless in a secular society" (Eph. 2:12). This revelation of God in Christ was—indeed, had to be—through the actuality of manhood and in concrete historical existence. The Church responds with faith, thanksgiving, and obedience. But this faith is secondary and derivative, for it is response to revelation rather than revela-

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tion itself.²⁵ The primary and determinative factor is not the Church's Kerygma, but the original creative presence of the Lord Jesus as a real man in whom God himself was savingly at work. The full explication of this datum in history must have a place in any theology that claims to be essentially Christian. And in New Testament scholarship it claims nothing less than the central place.

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²⁵ Cf. J. Jeremias, *Das Problem des historischen Jesus* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1960), p. 23.