

the New Testament. That direct answer to our needs which we are always seeking is not to be found there in the form of some simple prescription. Such can only be found there if we read back our own solutions into the past; and this has indeed happened in all ages. The direct legacy of all past time to us can only be the questions and the needs of bygone ages and the various ways in which men have attempted to deal with them. But perhaps the past sharpens not only our insight but also our conscience and tells us that no age is exempt from the necessity of beginning all over again, of testing, critically and yet humbly, the spirits of the ages that have gone before, because we, too, are called to decision. Perhaps, as we learn this, we are brought to acknowledge that the Church can only exist as the community of Christ in so far as grace repeatedly lays hold on us and re-creates us as instruments of his service; and that we must leave him to care for the continuity of the Church, who alone is able to ensure the continuance of grace.

IV

THE CANON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT AND
THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH¹

DOES the canon of the New Testament constitute the foundation of the unity of the Church? In view of the many different versions of the Christian proclamation to be found in the New Testament, the historian must return a negative answer to this question. Within the framework of a short lecture, the evidence for this statement can only be adduced in outline and limited to uncomplicated facts and a few examples.

1. A theological problem is already implicit in the fact that the canon presents us with four Gospels instead of one and that even the first three reveal important divergences in order, selection and presentation. Naturally, the differences in the traditions drawn upon at various points and the individual characteristics of the Evangelists contribute to this state of affairs. But only a far too superficial approach which understands the Gospels primarily as factual reports and ultimately refuses to reckon with them as proclamation can be satisfied with this solution. We can postulate with certainty that none of the Evangelists himself knew the historical Jesus. To express the situation paradoxically, for all of them the exalted Lord of faith preceded the Incarnate One in the order of knowledge and determined the aspect under which he was seen by each of them from his own particular angle of vision. In addition, all of them belong to the Hellenistic Christian community. Matthew and Luke both presuppose Mark and a source usually known as the Logia; all three presuppose an already formulated narrative of the Passion and Easter. John avails himself of what is certainly a version of the Synoptic tradition, even if it is one that has run wild. There is a time-lag between the Gospels,

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but not such as to make important differences inevitable on that ground alone. However, they do in fact take divergent roads. The pattern is as follows: Mark, by means of his many miracle stories, depicts the secret epiphany of him who receives his full glory at Easter, Matthew points to the bringer of the Messianic Torah, John to the ever-present Christ, while Luke, historicizing and portraying salvation history as a process of development, composes the first 'Life of Jesus'. To give another example: no Hellenistic Christian ever doubted that the predicate 'Son of God' in the metaphysical sense was rightly to be ascribed to Jesus. It is true that, in his Baptism narrative, Mark reveals the continued existence within the community of an older view standing for an Adoptionist Christology and seeing in the Baptism the consecration of the Messiah (cf. Rom. 1.4; Acts 2.36; Heb. 1.5). But in his own work all traces of this view have been obliterated and Jesus is delineated without any reserve in the colours of the Hellenistic *theios anthropos*. Both the other Synoptists already speak of the divine conception of Jesus, Matthew representing the Messiah as the second Moses and the Saviour of the eschatological People of God, Luke harking back to classical mythology and representing the divine Child as the World-Redeemer, as in the Fourth Eclogue of Virgil. In the Fourth Gospel, the motif of a Virgin Birth is seen as incongruous in relation to him who, as the Logos, is from the beginning in the bosom of the Father and one with him, and, therefore, can alone be the Revealer. The confession (common to all the Evangelists) that Jesus is the Son of God is thus differently explicated with the help of conceptions assimilated from the contemporary environment. The proclamation of the Incarnate One is qualified in each of our Gospels by a particular theological interest.

Thus the Evangelists are in a position to exercise criticism on each other without any inhibitions. Already we find Matthew treating the source of his Baptism narrative in this way because he found its Christology intolerable. His successors did likewise. For instance, Matthew takes offence at the drastic manner in which the healing of the woman with the issue of blood is treated in Mark 5.27ff. The idea that the garment of the miracle-worker imparts divine power which is transmitted by touch and has healing properties is a popular Hellenistic conception. It occurs again in the accounts of Peter's healing shadow and Paul's miraculous hand-

kerchief (Acts 5.15; 19.12) and in later ages is at the root of the cult of relics. Matthew corrects this crudely magical outlook by making the healing effective not through contact with the garment but simply through Jesus' word of power. In order to bring the mysterious majesty of Jesus into sharper relief he drastically reduces the broad sweep of Mark's miracle narratives in which the story teller's pleasure in his craft is all too evident and in which even motives of purely secular literary technique are operative. Luke doubtless omits deliberately the anathema pronounced on Peter by Jesus in Mark 8.33 because he finds it unbearable. He alone of the Evangelists has made the call of Peter the object of a special miracle story and at this, as at other points in his Gospel, sets the other Apostles in the shadow of the Prince of the Apostles who is for him the embodiment of the Church's *ministerium*. Obviously, too, dogmatic interests have determined the plan of the Fourth Gospel. For this reason a symbolic introduction precedes each of the two first sections (chs. 2 and 13). The wedding at Cana and the Cleansing of the Temple (which is quite arbitrarily transferred to the beginning of the Gospel) mark Jesus out as the salvation and judgment of the world; the foot-washing illustrates the fact that the disciples, hated by the world, yet stand in the divine *agape*. Thus the Evangelist has 'slanted' the familiar stuff of the tradition as contained in the Synoptists so that it can be used as material for his own proclamation and has thus robbed it of its autonomy. This is most evident with regard to the miracle stories and the Johannine critique of the traditional ecclesiastical approach is at its sharpest in this regard. This critique sees the miracles of Jesus as symbols which (4.48; 6.26; 20.29) he expressly removes from the sphere in which current Christian interpretation conceived them to move—that of 'evidence'. Examples of this kind can be multiplied almost indefinitely and can indeed be extended to include passages in which the same word takes on a different meaning through being used in a different context. From what has so far been said we may legitimately conclude that a comprehensive explanation of the variations in our Gospels, and particularly of the divergences in the selection of material from the tradition, may rightly be sought in the different theological outlooks of the Evangelists.

2. The existence of the canon has produced the assumption now

current in the Church (and to which Systematic Theology has often lent countenance) that the New Testament gives us a reasonably complete picture of the history and message of primitive Christianity. It is true that we undoubtedly know much more about them than we do about most of the comparable phenomena of the classical period, because the Church has preserved and transmitted her tradition with such care. But in spite of this we should not allow ourselves to forget the fragmentary character even of this knowledge. We are brought up against it with particular force when we make the attempt to reconstruct the authentic tradition about Jesus from the New Testament sources. While we can say with certainty that the great bulk of the tradition does not enable us to lay hold of the historical Jesus, equally we can say that even the most highly perfected procedures of historical science permit us to make on this point only very approximate estimates of probability. This can be seen clearly in the many extremely disparate versions of the life and message of Jesus and in A. Schweitzer's comprehensive account of *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. Paradoxically enough, the necessary reconstruction is difficult for us (and indeed appears at times almost hopeless) not because there is too little material in the tradition, but because there is too much. The primitive Christian community did not distinguish, as we do, between the historic Jesus and the exalted Lord. Palestinian and Hellenistic Christian prophecy alike spoke in the name of the Exalted One, as we can see in the Apocalypse of John. In the development of the tradition, these sayings—couched for the most part in the first person—have become confused with the words of the historical Jesus and ascribed to him simply because primitive Christianity was concerned not, as we are, with the exact period of their origin, but with the Spirit of the Lord revealing himself in both groups alike. We cannot simply accept this situation without questioning, but must make critical distinctions within it. For inspiration does not annul the fact that, when the prophet speaks, he uses the thought-forms of his time and therefore also its theological conceptions. Thus the tradition concerning Jesus cannot be brought under a single denominator. The work of the Form-Critics has shown that the narrative material must be viewed in the same light as the sayings; the connecting links between the pericopae are almost entirely the Evangelists' own composition

and serve as the skeletal structure for the individual fragments of the tradition. Thus, however much the canon by its very existence tempts us to regard all sections of the Gospel material as being on the same level, such a procedure does not do justice to the facts of the case. The final secret of the art of exegesis lies in seeing the differences and in drawing distinctions.

There is a second point to be noted, closely connected with this one. We are accustomed to think, and are encouraged in our opinion by the very existence of the New Testament canon, by the current ecclesiastical outlook and frequently by Systematic Theology, that we have in the New Testament a set of self-contained assertions so that the whole can be rightly conceived as a fixed number of *dicta probantia*. But this is to misunderstand the occasional nature of most New Testament utterances. We find that they are really concerned with answers to concrete questions, with the refutation of certain well-defined errors, with warnings and consolations addressed to concrete individuals; they presuppose certain premises and admit of different conclusions. The exegete is handicapped because, as a rule, he can only view the second party in a discussion or dissension through the eyes of the first and is thereby seduced into passing one-sided judgments and drawing premature conclusions. Once again, some examples may help to illustrate the point: was Peter unable to answer Paul's complaints against him in Antioch and did he therefore admit the justice of them, or did the two part in open conflict? What conclusions did Barnabas, his fellow-accused, draw from the quarrel? Luke is certainly still aware of the problem, but here as elsewhere he finds both a ground and a camouflage for essential theological differences of principle in personal differences of opinion. Why, after this conflict, does Antioch seem to have been off the map for Paul? How did it happen that most of the Pauline communities came under other leadership after only one generation? What of Apollos, to whom the Enthusiasts at Corinth seem to have been in the habit of appealing? How did they justify this appeal? Who were those whom, when the Epistle to the Philippians was written, were 'preaching Christ in envy' and using the fact of Paul's imprisonment against him? How questionable must his authority have been during his lifetime if anybody dared to do this! How did Peter come to be replaced by James in the original community at

Jerusalem—an event which seems to have occurred simultaneously with the end of Palestinian Enthusiasm and the rise of a Christian rabbinate? What were the doctrinal differences—reported in Acts 6—separating the Palestinians and the Hellenists? Only doctrinal differences account for the fact that the latter could not hold out in Jerusalem while the adherents of the Law remained relatively unchallenged for at least fifteen years. From what milieu does the enigmatic phenomenon of the Fourth Gospel arise, or for that matter the equally puzzling Epistle of James? This series of questions, which can be extended indefinitely, shows that the New Testament contains an inexhaustible wealth of unsolved (and, in part, probably insoluble) historical and theological problems. Only those speak to us out of its pages, who were capable of writing, were obliged to write and whose writings the Church of later days, for whatever reasons, thought it good to preserve. But they represent only a diminishing minority over against the many who passed on the message without leaving behind them a written deposit and therefore an abiding memorial. What entitles us to assume that the speech and the writings of this vast majority would not have differed from those of the New Testament authors? From time to time we catch some echo of their voice which suggests the contrary, and indeed the probability of this is already clear from the many-sidedness of the New Testament itself. This in turn means, however, that only fragments of the discussion within primitive Christianity have been preserved for us and that the variability of the primitive Christian kerygma must have been very much greater than a consideration of the state of affairs as revealed in the canon would lead us to suppose.

3. Yet this variability is already so wide even in the New Testament that we are compelled to admit the existence not merely of significant tensions, but, not infrequently, of irreconcilable theological contradictions. An approach to this judgment may be made through the evaluation of a point which has not usually been taken as seriously as it deserves. It is generally acknowledged that the Fourth Evangelist employs the literary device of introducing and underlining a master theme by means of a misunderstanding on the part of the disciples. In so doing, is he not raising a theological problem which demands the most thorough examination? Our conviction that primitive Christianity rightly interpreted its

Lord (or rather, the tradition about him) in every respect and also handed on this tradition without distortion is by no means *a priori* unassailable; indeed, in a number of cases it is demonstrably false. When Jesus in Mark 7.15 refuses to agree that man contracts defilement from external sources, he is abandoning the foundation principle on which the whole Jewish cultus was based. And when, in his turn, he finds the source of all impurity in man's own heart, the inescapable implication is that man as such is corrupt and can come to salvation only through forgiveness. A critical analysis of the rest of the chapter shows how this word of Jesus has been hedged in by glosses originating both in Palestinian and Hellenistic Christianity. We find that, on the one side, the saying is toned down by being made to serve the polemic against the rabbinate for overlaying the will of God with its own exceptions and casuistry. On the other side, however, the whole saying is given a moralizing twist: it is vice which essentially constitutes defilement. Neither gloss is incorrect in itself, but both take the edge off the radically new element in the attitude of Jesus. The real point of his saying here is precisely that it does *not* distinguish between a divine commandment and the injunctions of men. Such a distinction would not have been recognized by Judaism, because in Judaism a rabbinic decision is understood as the explication of a divine commandment and therefore possesses derivatively the authority of revelation. This word of Jesus strikes not merely at rabbinic exegesis and practice but at the very heart of the legislation governing ceremonial and ritual purity; on this occasion Jesus did not scruple to attack and abrogate what for Judaism had the force of, indeed, according to the literal sense of the Old Testament, actually *was*, a divine commandment. The Palestinian Church, however, remains blind to this new insight, because it maintains the distinction between divine commandment and human injunction. Hellenistic Christianity adulterates the word of Jesus equally, although in another way: it enumerates evil deeds from which we must and can keep ourselves, while Jesus declares our heart to be guilty and makes it responsible for the genesis of wickedness. Thus the exposure of our lost condition is turned into merely moralistic admonition and the Judge of all becomes simply the purveyor of a superior ethic. The same kind of thing happens in Mark 2. The saying of Jesus in v. 27 that the Sabbath is made for man is

immediately qualified in v. 28 by the added statement that the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. The community was prepared to ascribe to its Master what it had not the courage to claim for itself. This qualifying insertion shows that it shrank from exercising the freedom given in Jesus and preferred to take renewed refuge in a Christianized form of Judaism. Conversely, its polemic against Pharisaism on grounds of hypocrisy (Matt. 23 is example enough) only succeeds in deadening the impact of the actual attack made by Jesus himself. The latter is in fact aimed at the self's struggle to attain righteousness: thus, its target is every form of the religion of works and therefore, in the last resort, every human being. The equation of Pharisaism with hypocrisy produces a situation in which the judgment of Jesus falls merely on moral defect; and a path leading to a religion of works within Christianity is opened up, although Jesus' attack on the true essence of Pharisaism has already put up the sign 'No entry'. The caricature of the Pharisee as a hypocrite has cost the Church itself very dear. Important as they are, these examples are only the most outstanding among a wealth of others. They are designed to show that the history of Christianity and of its doctrinal tradition cannot be viewed and described purely in terms of continuity with Jesus. It is also a history of discontinuity between the Lord and the disciples. At the earliest stage in its life to which we can have access, the primitive community is already in part an apprehending, in part a misapprehending, community. While it bears witness to the majesty of its Lord, at the same time it obscures it. Even its faith was hidden in the earthen vessel of its humanity and the correctness of its belief was as questionable as orthodoxy always is.

But once all this is admitted, there can no longer be any grounds for surprise when opposing doctrinal viewpoints are found in violent collision in other parts of the New Testament. Luther was quite right, in my opinion, when he judged the Pauline doctrine of justification and that of the Epistle of James to be theologically incompatible. The treatment of Paul's apostleship in Acts makes assumptions which Gal. 1 passionately contests; and this not in any polemical fashion, but as a matter of self-evident fact. It is incomprehensible to me how anyone can reconcile the eschatology of the Fourth Gospel with that of Revelation. It is obvious that the phrases 'the faith once for all delivered to the saints' (Jude 3)

and 'the truth you already have' (II Peter 1.12) are designed to play off the objective nature of Church tradition against new revelations of truth which, according to the Gnostics, the Spirit is always giving. The writers concerned had probably no viable alternative. But what kind of tradition is it which can quite happily allow canonical authority to Jewish legends about the fight between Michael and Satan for the body of Moses and, with equal lack of embarrassment, describe Christians as becoming partakers of the divine nature by baptism (II Peter 1.4)? Surely such methods of argument sound the death-knell of the primitive Christian doctrine of the Spirit found in Paul and John and demonstrably going back to Jesus himself? For we have reached a stage when it is not enough for the Spirit to be effective in and through the process of tradition: the Spirit is now dissolved *into* tradition. The *ecclesia docens* has now acquired proprietary rights over the 'Spirit of Ministry'. Every unauthorized exegesis and interpretation of Scripture can now be prohibited; the *locus classicus* for this is II Peter 1.20. Ordination is now the expression of a principle of legitimacy and succession. In short, we have now crossed the border out of primitive Christianity and laid the foundations of early Catholicism. The time when it was possible to set up Scripture in its totality in opposition to Catholicism has gone beyond recall. Protestantism today can no longer employ the so-called Formal Principle without rendering itself unworthy of credence in the eyes of historical analysis. The canon of the New Testament does not divide Judaism from early Catholicism: it affords a foothold to the latter as well as to the former.

4. We now have three results: (a) the variability of the New Testament kerygma; (b) the extraordinary wealth of theological positions in primitive Christianity (a phenomenon going beyond the horizon of the New Testament); (c) the incompatibility between some of these positions which has already partly emerged in the above discussion. From these three premises we may now formulate the conclusion on which our thesis is based. It can only run thus: the New Testament canon does not, as such, constitute the foundation of the unity of the Church. On the contrary, as such (that is, in its accessibility to the historian) it provides the basis for the multiplicity of the confessions. The variability of the kerygma in the New Testament is an expression of the fact that

in primitive Christianity a wealth of different confessions were already in existence, constantly replacing each other, combining with each other and undergoing mutual delimitation. It is thus quite comprehensible that the confessions which exist today all appeal to the New Testament canon. Fundamentally, the exegete cannot dispute their methodological or their material right to do this. If the canon as such is binding in its totality, the various confessions may, with differing degrees of historical justification, claim as their own larger or smaller tracts of it, better or less known New Testament writers. Their claim is incontestable in principle and capable of demonstration in particular instances. The opposite is the case with the unity of the Church: taking the same point of departure, we find that it is fundamentally not susceptible of proof and that all confessional claims to finality are highly disputable. Must we then admit that Lessing's fable of the three rings in *Nathan the Wise* is our last word also? This would certainly be my view, if the task of exegesis stopped at historical confirmation. Whenever the attempt is made to build a case solely on 'It is written . . .', the scientific criticism of the New Testament must, I am profoundly convinced, lead in the last resort to an acknowledgment of Lessing's fable as a true picture of the situation. But we should then be missing the crucial point that the New Testament itself sets over against theological *statement* (even the statements contained in the canon) the theological *task* of 'discerning the spirits'. In other words, careful attention must be paid both to the unity of letter and spirit and to the distinction between them. The principle which Paul establishes in II Cor. 3 with regard to the Old Testament cannot be restricted to the Old Testament but is applicable in precisely the same way to the canon of the New Testament. Idealist thinkers have been accustomed to interpret the antithesis of letter and spirit in the Greek sense; that is, they have seen it as analogical with the antithesis of inward and outward, content and form. This analogy is certainly false. Paul, who is always stressing corporeality as the domain of the Spirit, can hardly be summoned as the star witness in an action on behalf of 'inwardness'. We must not so separate letter and spirit as to allot to them different regions of man's being. Paul clearly sees both as powers which span and move the universe, and thus such a separation would result in a dualistic cosmology quite foreign to the Apostle's

thought. Further light is thrown on the problem when we remember that, in Pauline thought, spirit and flesh are not things in themselves but modes in which man exists as obedient or disobedient to God. The Pauline doctrine of the Law shows that the same is the case with the relationship of spirit and letter. It is, without any doubt, dialectical. Paul refused to be driven into antinomianism and maintained steadfastly that the law (understood as the revealed will of God) was just, holy and good. But he was careful to distinguish between the law or the will of God and that law as distorted by the pious man to aid him in his efforts to acquire a righteousness of his own. It is just this law distorted by us as a means to our own self-righteousness which Paul in II Cor. 3 calls 'the letter'. To the question 'Wherein does the abuse of God's revealed will actually lie?' we return the answer 'In the fact that men do not let God's claim upon them remain *his* claim, but imagine him to be a prisoner of his own ordinance and therefore begin to venerate the law as a self-existent reality rather than as a proclamation of the divine will: thus they allow it to usurp God's place.' Similarly creation becomes 'cosmos' and the human creature becomes 'flesh' when the relation of the immediately apprehensible to the Creator goes unheeded; and thus the gift is isolated from the Giver so that it becomes the instrument of human self-will. That all gifts of God *can* be misused we see in the example of Corinth when the Enthusiasts transform the Lord's Supper into the heavenly banquet and the medicine of immortality. They base their assurance and self-assertion on the divine gift, just as the legalist bases his on the law. Paul assailed both parties, teaching that the gift is a mode of the Giver's presence and not a substitute for him. We can never keep God in custody because he would then cease to be God and to be our Lord. We 'have' him only when, and as long as, he has us.

In terms of our present problem, this means that we cannot keep God imprisoned even within the canon of the New Testament. Because the Jews held this view of the Old Testament, Paul speaks of the Old Testament canon as 'the letter that killeth'. The same is true of the New Testament if it is approached in the same way. The canon is not the word of God *tout simple*. It can only become and be the Word of God so long as we do not seek to imprison God within it; for this would be to make it a substitute for the God

who addresses us and makes claims upon us. The turn of phrase 'the truth you already have' in II Peter 1.12 shows that the Church has always tended to do this very thing. If we identify Church tradition with 'the Truth', we are seeing it apart from the Spirit who, according to John 16.13, is always newly present to lead us into all truth; and we are also seeing it apart from the God who manifests himself as present by speaking to us. Certainly, this does not mean that we are to ignore the tradition for the sake of the Spirit. To do so would be to deny that God has already taken the field in his revelation of himself and that the Spirit, according to the same Johannine passage, does not speak on his own account but, remembering the word of Jesus, speaks what he has heard. Faith stands always, according to Heb. 11, in the continuity of the divine action and only sectarianism seeks to detach itself from this history. But it is necessary to distinguish between the continuity of the divine action and that of human tradition, even though it be Church tradition. They are not identical. Thus the fathers, to whom the Jews in the Fourth Gospel appeal, may not be played off against the present Christ. They are only his witnesses, as are the cloud of witnesses in Heb. 11, in so far as they receive their testimony from God and the Messiah respectively, and thus stand within the continuity of the presence of God. We finish up with an inescapable dialectic. The Spirit does not contradict the 'It is written . . .' but manifests himself in the Scripture. But Scripture itself can at any moment become 'the letter' and indeed does so as soon as it ceases to submit to the authorization of the Spirit and sets itself up as immediate Authority, seeking to replace the Spirit. The tension between Spirit and Scripture is constitutive: in other words, the canon is not simply to be identified with the Gospel and is only the Word of God in so far as it is and becomes the Gospel. Only within these limits is it the foundation of the unity of the Church. For the Gospel is the sole foundation of the one Church at all times and in all places.

But the question 'What is the Gospel?' cannot be settled by the historian according to the results of his investigations but only by the believer who is led by the Spirit and listens obediently to the Scripture. The unity of the Church is never immediately accessible; it exists only for faith. Like the Gospel, the unity of the Church is discerned not by saints already enjoying the beatific vision but by

those struggling *in via*; it is discerned by them among the confessions and in spite of their multiplicity: it is discerned along with and over against the New Testament canon: and the one condition of this discernment is that they hear and believe the Gospel.