

**The
Antipathy Between
Prophecy and Religion**

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1 Introduction

When prophecy becomes an object of study for the historian, sociologist, or philosopher it is usually seen as a particular manifestation of a universal phenomenon—religion. Thus the faiths with a prophetic character come to be regarded as a species of the genus “religion” and it then becomes possible to speak of the “prophetic element in religion” and to contrast “prophetic religion” with other types of “religion”.

But prophecy does not understand itself in these terms. It does not regard itself as the species of a genus. It does not wait for the scientist of religion to classify it and tell it where it belongs in the family of religions. From a position within the prophetic ethos, religion does not appear as the over arching universal phenomenon of which prophecy is a particular type. Instead religion appears as something that stands over against faith in the word of the speaking God as a competitor with that faith.

It is my aim to present the thesis that prophecy and religion are antipathetical and that Christianity must be understood in the context of that antipathy.

The Hebrew prophets have given the name of their office to that great stream of life in God which is what we mean by prophecy. We are not using the term prophecy to refer only to that which is directly related to the prophets of Israel or to the period in which they flourished. We are using it in the broader sense of the whole stream of life that is comprehended in the story of the Hebrew and Christian peoples.

Prophecy is not a device for extracting wisdom from the divine life. The content of prophecy is never metaphysical or philosophical, but it is always moral and personal. Prophecy cannot be dealt with in the abstract but is always a special word to a particular human situation. It is this aspect of prophetic experience that the existentialist Christian thinkers of the present

day have grasped upon and over-emphasized to such an extent that they have obscured the fact that prophecy also points to an overall purpose of God for history and for society.

The prophetic event does not take place in an historical and social vacuum. It is related to all the other prophetic events, and the story of these events is what has been called holy history.

There is no true knowledge of holy history that is accessible to the detached intellect. Holy history only discloses itself to those who are themselves involved in holy history. God is still speaking and calling men to write new chapters in holy history with their lives.

The story of God's dealings with men is a story in two parts and we become acquainted with it through the Hebrew-Christian scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Prophetic experience takes place in the context of this story, and it is by means of our knowledge of this story that we are helped to see what God means by the word that he speaks to us today. This history as we find it in the Bible is not God's word for today. But God's word to us today is all of one piece with his word to the fathers, prophets, and apostles. By hearing and obeying God's word to us we become a part of their story and linked to them in a mysterious kinship of the spirit.

No book, not even the Bible, can be a substitute for God's word that he speaks to me. And yet the God who comes to me and reveals his personal word to me is one who calls me to a particular task that is related to his overall purpose as we see that purpose unfolding in the Bible story.

Therefore, in attempting to set forth the vision of the New Way, I will begin with an examination of the Old and New Testaments, and I will follow this with a sketch of the fluctuating emphasis on the New Way in 1900 years of church history.

2 The Old Covenant and Religion

In the Old Testament God is “The Transcendent One whose ground of life is in himself completely independent of the world’s existence.” [Eichrodt(1951), p. 29] God “remains absolutely free, not limited or conditioned by his creation.” [t’Hooft(?)] Man has a special place in God’s created universe because he is a creature to whom God speaks demanding a reply. He is a being whom God created for a life of continuous dialogue with himself. It is solely by hearing and obeying the word that God speaks to him that man receives real knowledge of God, of himself, and of the meaning of his existence. Therefore the ground of his true being is not in man himself but in his relation to his creator. God speaks and man hears and obeys. It is hearing and obeying that makes a man a man. This is the experience that is constitutive of his humanity. It is this experience that we speak of as “Prophetic experience” because hearing and obeying the speaking God is the essence of prophecy.

In this relationship God does not transmit his own wisdom to the mind of man so that man possesses the divine wisdom in the same way that the creator does. By hearing and obeying man does not become “like God.” He remains the dependent one—the answerer of the speaker. He does not come to possess the divine wisdom apart from the experience of hearing and obeying.

Through a life of hearing and obeying, worship and prayer, the life of man can come to reflect the wisdom and purpose of God. When the Bible tells us that man was created in the image of God this means that man can fulfill the purpose for which he was created by living a life of faith and obedience. The image of God was lost through disobedience. God, says Emil Brunner, reveals his will to man and expects a response of obedience and trust from him. “It is not that man as he is in himself bears God’s

likeness, but rather that man is designated for and called to a particular relation with God.” [Brunner(1943), p. 128] This “relation with God” is what we understand the Bible to mean by faith. Faith in this sense is not “a relation to something, to an idea, a truth or doctrine—not even a divinely revealed doctrine—but it is wholly a personal relationship: My trustful obedience to him who meets me as gracious Lord.” [Brunner(1946), p.36] To fail to make this response of trustful obedience is to fail to fulfill the primary condition of human existence.

Man became alienated from his own essential being because he became “unwilling to live within the limits of his creatureliness” [Dietrich(1958), p.?] and sought after another kind of wisdom than that which comes from the mouth of the speaking God. “The fall of man” is therefore a fall from the dialogic relationship of hearing and obeying. “We sin,” says Edmund Perry, “whenever we step out of this conversational relationship with God.” [Perry(1958), p.119]¹

Divine revelation does not have as its object the communication of some specifically “religious” truth. Revelation is concerned with that which a man needs to know to be a man, namely, how he ought to relate himself to his creator, his fellow man, and to history. It is in these relationships that a man finds who he is. Wisdom, in the Biblical sense, has a moral, social, and historical dimension, but it is totally lacking in a metaphysical dimension. The Bible does not deal with the “wisdom of the wise” but with the “wisdom of the just.”

The prophetic word comes as a call to become gathered into a community under God’s rule. In the light of the experience of this call, history is seen to have a meaning because God has a purpose for it, and we know that this meaning has to do with the extension of God’s rule to all mankind

¹Brunner says, “From the word man fell, namely from that [the word] which God himself gives to man.” [Brunner(1947), p. 296]

and through all history. This is the vision of the coming kingdom of God. It is a mistake, however, to attempt to objectify this vision and transform it into an abstract theory of history. The prophetic word comes to us as a call to action. Therefore the vision of God is hidden from all but those who respond to him in the obedience of faith and thus become responsible participators in “the great work of God in the earth.”

The content of prophecy, therefore, comprehends the whole moral and social life of man and his whole understanding of history. The obedience that God calls for is not merely obedience to this or that, but total obedience. God’s call for moral rectitude and community must be answered in the context of the common life. It is a call to live under the conditions that other men do, but from a different center. The godly life is not found by avoiding marriage or parenthood or all gainful employment and civic responsibility. God does not require us to create a special religious environment in which we will find it easier to answer his call. We are called to a life of obedience in the moral, social, and historical situation of our own time. It is “into the midst of history with all its insecurity and unforeknowable possibilities that God’s will leads.” [Eichrodt(1951), p. 26] This does not mean that we must accommodate our lives to the “facts” of history or the conventions of the prevailing morality or the institutions of society. We are not to become merely assimilated into the world as it is, but we are to seek and find the will and purpose of God as it relates to the whole of life.

The life to which men are called by the prophetic word is not to be lived in specially created conditions. It does not require a specially favorable environment. It does not avoid the common ventures of human existence. We must answer God’s call in the social, historical situation in which we find ourselves because it is in this context that God chooses to address us.

A community whose center is faith in the speaking God who rules the lives and consciences of its members will develop a style of life that is different from the style of life among people who “walk in their own counsels” and do not listen to God. Thus the people who listen to God become a people “separated unto God.” But this separation is not for the purpose of finding purity through non-involvement in society and in history. God’s people are set apart because God has called them to a mission to the nations. They have a priestly relationship to the world at large. God intends to draw all men to himself through the faithfulness of a community that lives under his rule. The people of God are summoned to participation in the natural forms of society so that by living the life of obedience “before men” they will draw others into this life and the community that springs from this life. The life of hearing and obeying is always related to a particular human situation at a particular period in history, and it is also related to the over-all purpose of God for history at one particular point in its unfoldment. Because of this dynamic quality the prophetic relationship to God will not produce exactly the same “style of life” in all ages.

The question must now be asked: Is this prophetic relationship to God a part of religion conceived as a universal phenomenon or, on the contrary, is it impossible to regard prophetic experience as one part of religion in its generic sense?

This question appears very simple when viewed from the standpoint of the objective scientist. He does not even see the problem. For him, Judaism and Christianity are only too obviously two of the many species of the genus religion. But from the viewpoint of those who have made a commitment to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; Judaism and Christianity stand for something unique because they bear witness to God who has revealed his will and purpose for history through a community and is still doing so. In the faiths rooted in prophetic experience, there is

a definite antipathy toward “religion in general.” This is something more than a concern about the over-formalizing of religion which is a blight to which no religion is immune. The attitude of suspicion with which the Old Testament prophets view the cultic factors in Judaism is deep seated, and the explanation of it is to be found in the essential nature of prophetic experience.

In the Old Testament there is a tension between the obligation to hear and obey the commands of God and the obligation to fulfill the demands of the cultus. It is always easier to conform to the predictable demands of the cultus than to answer the God whose command for this day may require decisions and actions beyond anything previously contemplated. In the deepening insight of the prophets, the cultic and ethnic factors are increasingly minimized and it is seen that God’s people are to be linked to him by obedience alone and that some time in the future the cultic factor will be eliminated entirely. Faith, in the Old Testament, is not faith in a “religion” but in the creator of all things who reveals his personal will and whose revealed word must be obeyed. Man’s relationship to God is not a religious relationship but is the “unique connexion of the incomprehensible and mysterious creator with his creature—a connexion established not by man but by God alone.” [Eichrodt(1951), p. 30]

The Old Testament is not concerned with religion and nowhere does the word “religion” appear in its pages. From the Bible’s viewpoint what the world calls religion is simply the universal phenomena of men “being led away from God by divers claims and system.” [Perry(1958), p. 88]

To any assertion that the witness of the Bible is the witness to a religion I must reply: No, it is a witness to the sound of a voice—not the voice of man but of his creator—which must be heard and obeyed in all things. All who answer this voice become part of a community through which God is working out his purpose for man in history.

But when we say that the Bible is not concerned with religion in its generic senses this does not mean that the term religion is to be abandoned by those who are scientifically studying the religions. For them such a term is logical and inevitable. But this is not the term to employ for prophetic experience when viewed from the standpoint of Old Testament faith. In calling Abraham, God was not merely starting another religion. And in sending his son Jesus Christ into the world “in the fullness of time,” God was not adding still another religion to the list. The differentiation of Judaism and Christianity and their pursuit of separate destinies since Pentecost is due to man’s mistake.

The Judaeo-Christian experience of God compels the Jew and the Christian to look at the universal phenomena of religion in a very different way from the Hindu or the sociologist of religion or the (scientific?) objective historian of religion. Perhaps this is no more than to say that the meaning of words are largely determined by the standpoint of the user.

The objection may be made that in both Judaism and Christianity many features may be observed that conform to the image of “a religion,” such as: Temple worship, sanctuaries, priests separated from non-priests as a special order with distinctive garb and special functions, a hierarchy of priestly administrators culminating in a visible head, initiatory rites, sacrifices, altars, holy places, holy days, holy persons, holy seasons, holy acts, holy water, holy earth, holy oil, holy relics, fasts, vigils, processions, pilgrimages to holy places, repetition of set prayers and creeds, sacred charms and talismans, sacred jewels, paintings, images, sacred music and liturgies, authoritative sacred scriptures, incense, lights, candles, legalistic moral codes, self-perpetuating religious institutions, and many other features that are commonly found in many diverse religions.

It cannot be denied that all or nearly all of these features and practices will be encountered by the student of Hebrew and Christian history. But

the presence of these things in Judaism and Christianity are not to be accepted as primary data but rather as facts that require explanation and interpretation.

Few students of religion would claim that the special excellence and enduring qualities of Judaism spring from its cultic side. It is the voice of the prophet calling for obedience to God's righteousness that gives Judaism its unique spiritual strength. The prophets constantly contrast the piety of correct cultic observance with the piety of costly obedience in righteousness. They point to preoccupation with the cultus as a major hindrance to answering God's call to justice and moral rectitude.

Holy history is generally regarded to begin with Abraham. The culture in which Abraham was nurtured was not without its religious side. The religion was an integral part of the general culture whose function was to strengthen and uphold the institutions of civilization by its sanctions. Abraham made a choice between the security of a religion that both guarantees civilization and was guaranteed by it and the call of God to "get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, into a land that I will show thee." Abraham's story is known to us not because God called him but because he believed God. He rejected religion that is part of the cultural complex and subservient to it and chose the insecurity of living in obedience to the voice of the speaking God. "He went forth knowing not whither he went." He was not called to become a great individual saint but to become the father of a great people through whom all the nations of the earth would receive blessing. The story of the descendants of Abraham is the story of a people being led away from cultural and animistic religions in order that they may be a people who live by God's word. In the story of this people there is constant tension between the demand to answer God's call "while it is today" and the temptation to lapse into cultural or animistic religion or, worst of all, to transfer their devotion

to “a religion” composed of a rigid system of rules, customs, ordinances, and observances which are regarded as perpetually binding because they have their origin in past events of direct prophetic revelation. When this happens the prophetic experience itself is objectified and revered but from a distance. A pious orthodoxy and meticulous legalism become mistakenly identified with prophetic vocation, and the God who speaks “while it is today” is unheard. This is what the Bible calls “hardness of heart.”

The people who called Abraham their father became confirmed in their consciousness of unique vocation after their miraculous deliverance from bondage in Egypt and their establishment in the land originally promised to Abraham. At the foot of Mt. Sinai, God had called them “a nation of priests,” and they believed that they had been chosen by God for a mission to the nations. The Lord covenanted with them, “If you will obey my voice I will be your God and you will be my people.”

With the passage of time, the Sinaitic covenant became greatly elaborated by a complex system of laws and cultic practices. Gradually the obligation to obey “while it is today” became overlaid with a sterile legalism and institutionalism. God sent the prophets to prevent the cultic and legalistic elements from transforming Hebrew faith into something that is just another religion. It was not the prophets’ task to purge Judaism of its cultic and legalistic elements. They summoned God’s people to obedience within the conditions of the Old Covenant in which law and cultus were an integral part. But they did not accept the law and the cultus as elements of equal value to the demand for obedience. They saw the law and the cultus as parts of an incomplete and imperfect covenant. In the new day of God that is coming, a new covenant will be made from which these features will be excluded. Meanwhile the life of hearing and obeying must go on and every tendency to subordinate it to legalistic and cultic demands must be resisted.

The Old Testament is full of instances of the prophets' uneasy acceptance of law and cultus. Jeremiah castigates those who "handle the law yet know not Yahweh," [Bible(1953), Jer. 2:8; also Isa. 29:13, "Their heart is far from God."] and when Saul puts cultic considerations before obedience, Samuel tells him "To obey is better than sacrifice and to hearken than the fat of rams." [Bible(1953), 1 Sam. 15:22]

According to Amos, God says "I hate, I despise your feasts and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings I will not accept them and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs, to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." [Bible(1953), amos 5:21-24] "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices, says the Lord," according to Isaiah, "I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight if the blood of bulls or of lambs or of he-goats. Bring no more vain offerings... Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them... wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow." [Bible(1953), Isa. 1:11-17] In Hosea we find "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." [Bible(1953), Hosea 6:6] And Micah says, "will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgressions? The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with thy God." [Bible(1953), Micah 6:7-8]

Jeremiah goes as far as to question whether God ever intended the cultus to play such a prominent part in Hebrew life when he says, “Thus sayeth the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel . . . In the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt I did not speak to your fathers or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. But this command I gave them, ‘Obey my voice, and I will be your God and you shall be my people, and walk ye in all the ways that I have commanded you that it may be well with you.’” [Bible(1953), Jer. 7:21-23]

This theme is also to be found in the Psalms as in chapter 51:16,17: “For thou desirest not sacrifice, else would I give it, thou delightest not in burnt offering. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.” [Bible(1953), see also Psalms 51:6; 40:6-8; 69:30-31]

In the Old Testament the prophets look forward to a day that is coming in which God will make himself known in a different way and in a way that will completely fulfill his purpose for man and history. In this new day there will be righteousness and peace, a charismatic leadership similar to that of the age of the judges. It will be a day of healing for the afflicted, comfort for the mourners, freedom for the captives. The blessing and salvation of God will extend to all the inhabitants of the earth. A universal kingdom will be ruled by a king of Davidic descent. God’s people will serve him on earth through suffering. The mighty and proud will be brought low; the meek and humble will be exalted. God’s spirit will be poured forth on all flesh. God will deal with men directly by writing his law on their hearts. These things will come through a person who is anointed by God for man’s salvation. He will preach good news to the poor, and restore sight to the blind. A new covenant will be inaugurated by the redeemer in this new day, and indeed, it is by his being who he is and doing what he does that the new covenant comes into being. He is the covenant.

But also in this new day, new way, and new covenant the cultic factor is dispensed with. The whole community of God's people are to be a holy priesthood. The anointed one gives gifts to every one of God's people. All the people are taught by God and brought into unity with him. The law of God will not be an externalized written code but will be written upon the hearts of all.

In the vision of the prophets the new day and the new covenant is one in which men are not diverted from God's immediate demand for obedience by legalism or institutionalism. The new covenant is not to be a new religion with a new law, new temple, new priests, new sacrifices, new rituals and ceremonies. It is not a corpus of doctrines, rules, and regulations but a person. (Isaiah 42:6)

The Old covenant is therefore both an incomplete covenant and a preparatory covenant. It looks forward to another covenant in which God's holy people will be bound to him through obedience alone.

We can regard the faith of the Old Testament as being in tension with "religion" in at least three ways. *{Editor's note: The formatting of the following, three paragraphs has been changed. In the original, the first one was part of the previous paragraph, and they were not set off by numbers.}*

1. In the first way, the ground for this tension is to be found in the very nature and constitution of the prophetic experience of God. In the Old Testament faith is toward the one and only true God who created all things and who has chosen to reveal himself to man in unrepeatable events at particular times and places. Old Testament faith is directed to God who is known in and through events that have the concreteness of history. Holy history or the story of God's dealings with his people in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures has no parallels in the "religions of the world." God has chosen to reveal himself in these particular events according to a timetable of his self-

disclosure which is entirely under his control. Such a faith precludes any philosophy of religion in which prophetic faith is simply one way among a variety of equally valid ways to God. It is of the essence of prophetic faith that its object is the God who approaches man in the events of history and who demands that man respond to his self disclosure in historical events. There is no common denominator between this faith and “the religions of the world.” This is not to say that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob never speaks to any but those who are gathered into the historical and visible community of faith. But what must be maintained here is that what God says to the gentiles does not furnish them with a way to himself that is parallel to the way that belongs to his covenanted people.

2. The second type of tension between Old Testament faith and religion is in those instances where a particular religion intrudes into the life of God’s people and tempts them to stray from undivided loyalty and devotion to the only true God. It was this kind of situation that Moses encountered at the foot of Mt. Sinai and which was a perennial problem which the prophets were dealing with from time to time.
3. The third way in which the Old Testament is in tension with religion is at the point at which the cultic elements that are a legitimate part of the basic structures of the Old covenant become inflated in the life and practice of the community to such an extent that Hebrew life becomes dominated by the same kind of religiosity that is found in a wide variety of religions. This is to be seen in Jeremiah’s outburst against excessive emphasis on worship in the temple when he says, “Trust not in the lying words, The Temple of the Lord, The Temple of the Lord, The Temple of the Lord,” where this is coupled with

unjust social conditions and conformity to the ways of the world and its gods. [Bible(1953), Jer. 7:4]

The presence of these cultic elements in Judaism leads us to ask: Why are they there? If the prophetic experience is essentially independent of the cultus then of what use are the cultic elements? Here we must remember that the Old Covenant is a covenant of limited objectives and that it is not complete in itself but looks toward completion and fulfillment in another covenant in which God will do a new thing in his new day. From the perspective of new covenant faith, these cultic factors are seen to be related in a preparatory way to the noncultic structures of the new covenant. The apostle Paul regards the dispensation of the law as a preparation for the new covenant, “the law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ.” [Bible(1953), Gal. 3:24] And Robert Rendall says “the grammar of redemption had to be taught to man before he was fitted to receive the full revelation of God’s love in Christ.” [Rendall(1954), p. 99]

If the object of the Old Covenant is to prepare the way for the new and if the cultic side of the Old Covenant prepares the way for the non-cultic character of the New Covenant then this means that the cultic factors are there for a purpose and this purpose is the eventual elimination of cultic elements from the life of the people of prophetic faith.

This explanation implies that the tension between obedience and cultus in the Old Covenant is temporary and peculiar to the Old Covenant alone. If this is the right explanation it means that we cannot claim that all prophetic experience, in both Old and New Covenants, has its cultic side and this means that we are delivered from the necessity of forever striving to keep cultic and non-cultic factors “in balance.”

In turning now to the New Covenant and its relation to the Old we will be dealing again with these things but from the other side of that point in history that the Bible calls “God’s day.”

3 The New Covenant and Religion

The recent discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls has given us a picture of a religious group in New Testament times that had withdrawn in order to become a separate community, distinct from Judaism, practising a religious cultus of its own. The Qumran community represents a development that is conspicuously religious. It sought to pursue the prophetic vision by means of a prodigious employment of the many institutions of religion, and it had every appearance of being a new religion separate from Israel.

In contrast to this, Jesus recognizes no people of God outside Israel. When those who were disciples of Jesus became conscious of being “the church,” this meant for them that they were the covenant people of God—the “congregation of the Lord.”

The new covenant that Jesus inaugurated is not simply another covenant but it is the fulfiller and completer of the old covenant and it is to be understood as the means chosen by God to finish what he began to do in the old covenant. Therefore the new covenant does not have different objectives from the old. Both covenants have as their object the establishment of the righteousness of God in the affairs of men and the gathering of a community bound to God by obedience. The newness of the new covenant does not consist in the things covenanted about but in the *modus vivendi* by which these things are to be accomplished.

The new covenant is a new way to righteousness—a way that dispenses with legalism and all its weaknesses. New wine into new bottles does not mean new cultus for new doctrine. It means that the new covenant relationship with God through Christ must be allowed to find its own new order, the order of the gospel. (Paul says, “Now is righteousness manifested apart from the law.” Rom. 3:21)

And the new covenant is a new way to gather a holy community to the holy God. (“Once we were not a people but now we are the people of God.” says Peter.)

In the Book of Acts the faith that is toward Jesus is spoken of as “the way” (Acts 9:2, 22:24).

In this new covenant and new way we encounter a special kind of newness. It is as if we see the prophetic word of the Old Testament but with something new added.

The new addition is Christ himself. The new covenant and new way is not something that Jesus lectured about. It is not sacred doctrine that he imparts to a chosen few who in turn pass it down as a corpus of arcane wisdom from generation to generation. Nor is it a religious truth embodied in a religious ideology and cultus. The new covenant and new way is Christ himself. Isaiah prophesied “He will be to you a covenant,” and Jesus said, “I am the way.”

That which makes possible the new righteousness and new community is Jesus Christ and the relationship that men have to him.

This new way and new covenant becomes experienced through a personal encounter with Christ. It can only be understood in connection with a personal experience of him. What then can we say of this personal encounter? First it is an encounter in which Christ speaks to us demanding a reply. The word that he speaks to us comprehends all that God said to men through the law and the prophets. The word that Christ speaks is the word of God to us in a new covenant. Christ is not just God’s messenger. What he says, this is God’s word because Jesus Christ is the word. (Fox says “Christ’s name is called the word of God properly and not figuratively.” [Fox(1831), III, p. 176]) His word teaches us the righteousness that God requires of us. He is the enlightener of the conscience. He is a speaker whose word is truth. (Fox says, “Christ Jesus who is the light of the world, and doth

enlighten everyone that cometh into the world . . . is the word”; [Fox(1831), IV, p. 97] and “now are people coming to the light, and so to the word Christ Jesus, him by whom the world was made.” [Fox(1831), III, p. 132]) In the New Testament Peter and Stephen identify this speaker and teacher with the prophet spoken of by Moses (Deut. 18:15-18) who was to be heard and obeyed in all things. Christ himself announced that John was the last of the prophets. In its personal experience of the living Christ, the New Testament church believed that the prophetic word was coming to it from God’s son, (Heb. 1:1) speaking from heaven (Heb. 12:15).

The word that reaches us in our experience of Christ is a word that must be obeyed. He is the long awaited king of the long awaited kingdom. Fox says, “who love the light walk in the light, Jesus Christ is their king” [Fox(1831), VII, p. 59] “we look not at persons but at the power of God and know the reign of Christ amongst us” [Fox(1831), VII, p. 272] “for amongst us Christ is King.” [Fox(1831), VII, p. 272] He rules in men’s hearts by faith.

The New Testament also understands Christ to be the High priest of the new covenant. “With this recognition,” says Brunner, “the distinction between priesthood and laity has forever ceased to be tenable.” [Brunner(1953), p. 21]

Regarding an official priesthood in the New Testament, Eduard Schweizer says that “since Jesus Christ there has been but one such office, that of Christ himself” and he contrasts this with the hierarchical system of priestly ministries in the Qumran community. And Fox says, “If the high priest Jesus Christ be owned, then all the priests are put an end to . . .” [Fox(1831), IV, p. 33]

Schweizer points out that “long before the churches turned to formal theological thought, the uniqueness of Jesus and the absolute newness of their existence under him was so clear that they assigned to him the role that has

formerly belonged to the priests, prophets and kings.” [Schweizer(1957), p. 475] The same author asserts that the term office is nowhere used in the New Testament in connection with the work of a single church member. Christ incorporated in himself all the offices of the church. Church members do not hold or possess offices: they receive gifts and they function in the various services only as long and to the extent that these services continue to be given them.

The early church experienced Christ as prophet, priest, and king as they knew him as one risen from the dead and seated at his Father’s right hand, yet ever present in the midst of the community that trust and obey him. This church is not a continuation of an organization that Jesus founded during his earthly ministry. The small group that followed Jesus to the foot of the cross disintegrated in this crisis. Within 24 hours of his death they experienced total failure of faith, loyalty, and community. Jesus had foretold that this would happen not only in Peter’s case but for the whole group; “You will all scatter, every man to his own.”

When the process of reintegration began it was not along lines prescribed by Jesus during his lifetime. The regathering of the disciples at Pentecost was not to take up again where they had left off on Good Friday. They came together because they had received the inspiration of an extraordinary spirit sent by God and Christ for the express purpose of enabling them to know the risen Christ as Lord and to know themselves as a fellowship of the spirit of which Christ is the head. This is the “new spirit” prophesied by Ezekiel and the universal spirit prophesied by Joel. This spirit not only gave Jesus’ old followers new insight into the meaning of the resurrection but it made the living Christ real to many who had never known him in the flesh.

In Jesus’ ministry he does not speak of the new covenant until the eve of his death and then he associates its coming with the shedding of his own

blood. During Jesus' lifetime he did not establish a center like Qumran nor did he establish a group to act as the executors of his mission after his death. He did not institute a hierarchical ecclesiastical system with clergy separated from laity and the clergy in the driver's seat. If he intended to ordain certain official sacraments and secure their continuance as perpetual sacred rites, he certainly did it in a most casual and offhand way. The chosen twelve mentioned in the gospels are to be the rulers and judges in the eschatological kingdom of God, but it is doubtful that they were ever assigned the management of the Church or that they constituted a kind of Christian Sanhedrin as a result of authority delegated to them by Jesus. We see the idea of apostleship taking on a hierarchical meaning and even tending toward monarchical leadership in the case of James. But Paul resisted this trend. After the great council, in which Paul established his own right to apostleship, the apostolate, as a body vested with authority and the government of the Church, disappears from history. The twelve, says Schweizer, "are not the bearers or guardians of Jesus' teaching because in that case he would simply sink to the level of a rabbi who wants to go on teaching his doctrine through his pupils. In that case it would succumb to historical laws and would be bound in its transmission through its chain of guardians to lose... its original character and become... weaker and weaker as time went on." [Schweizer(1961), p. 2?] Brunner says that for the Church "the real norm is the revelation, Jesus Christ himself, who himself witnesses to us through the holy spirit, who, however, in addition to this self-revelation, makes use of the witness of the apostles. While we are bound in an absolute sense to the medium, to the means of revelation of the apostolic witness, we are only bound in a relative sense to the authority of this witness." [Brunner(1950), p. 47] The only absolute authority is Christ himself. "Faith is not acceptance of apostolic doctrine about

the son of God, but it is personal communion with Jesus Christ himself.” [Brunner(1946), p. 118]

The New Testament tells us that it is in this “personal communion with Jesus Christ himself” that the image of God in man is restored. The conversational relationship leading to righteousness and community is made a reality through the presence of Christ and his spirit in the heart of believers and in the midst of the Church.

The community of the new covenant is not guaranteed by a self-perpetuating hierarchical system of church government nor by an endless chain of custodians of orthodox faith. The new covenant church is a community in dialogue with its living Lord. Therefore there must be no church order that interferes with this dialogue. The church’s faith is only genuine “where the distress, difficulty, and tribulation of a direct meeting with God himself, as he comes to us in Jesus Christ, are not avoided.” [Schweizer(1961), p. 26?]

The new covenant is not a new religion but a new way to answer God’s call to righteousness and community apart from the law and apart from the cultus.

But we see in very early times the growth of a cultus. The conception of sacraments, of religious office, of liturgical worship- these and many more of the appurtenances of religion are even evident in the pages of the New Testament.

The worship of the early church seems to have taken the Jewish synagogue for its model. It would seem that before the church had time to find the worship pattern that belongs to the new way, its worship habits were being bent in the direction of modified synagogue worship. But Jesus made it plain to the Samaritan woman that “the day is coming and now is” when worship will cease to follow the old patterns of the Jews and Samaritans. It is very unlikely that when Jesus described the new worship as “worship in spirit and in truth” that what he had in mind was synagogue worship.

We are therefore confronted with an early Christian community in which religious and non-religious factors are mixed, and this has led modern theologians like Cullmann to conclude that Christianity is by definition a mixture of formal and spontaneous elements and that both are integral parts of the structure of Christianity. He deduces from this that a healthy Christianity is one that keeps these two elements in balance. He argues that since both elements have been present from very early times, they are equally essential to the life of the church.

The flaw in this way of thinking is that it fails to ask whether these religious elements ought to have been present in the life of the early church. The nature of the new covenant compels us to ask just this question. We can not accept cultic, ecclesiastical, liturgical, religious factors simply because they make an early appearance on the Christian scene and for no other reason. We have to ask whether they are there because of demands made by the new covenant or for some other reason.

Because the new covenant is not a religion or a cultus or an ecclesiastical institution but is, instead of these things, a person who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, we must recognize that this means that for the Christian the problem of spiritual renewal is not a problem of a return to a point in history which is normative for all succeeding ages. It is not of crucial importance that we know, in every detail, how the early church responded to the Christian revelation. However profitable it might be to have this knowledge, we are not bound to make our response identical with the response made in the first century. Schweizer says, "The apostolic message is never a 'chemically pure' substratum, but the unfolding of the gospel into the thought and speech of a particular time and place and therefore in constant need of reinterpretation." [Schweizer(1961), p. 26?]

The first-century Christians are not to be distinguished from the Christians of other ages because they alone made the right response to God's

revelation in Christ and all other generations of Christians have strayed from the standard that they set up.

These New Testament Christians are confronted with the same problem that faces every other generation of Christians, including our own. They had to find the new righteousness and new community that belong to the new covenant and to resist those forces from within and without that sought to mold the community along lines not consistent with the new covenant. The first Christians were partly successful and partly unsuccessful in doing this.

One of the first problems they had to face was their relation to the Jewish community. Two tendencies opposed each other here. On the one hand were those who believed that the new community was to be built on the superstructure of old covenant religion and that new disciples of Christ must first become Jews and accept the prescribed conditions of initiation into the Jewish community. On the other hand there were others like Stephen who saw that God had now sent the “Just One” of whom the prophets had prophesied and that this meant that the whole cultic approach of the Old Covenant was to be superceded by a new way or new approach to God. Paul, who heard Stephen’s dying plea for this approach, was the champion of this position and was able to prevail over the scruples of the apostles who had known Jesus in his campaign to admit members into the new community without requiring them to first become Jews.

Another occasion of tension is to be found in the struggle between order and disorder. In certain Christian outposts where the carry-over from Jewish tradition was not strong there was a lack of discipline and a tendency to loose morals. The efforts made to tighten up on discipline had the effect of increasing the authority of local leaders, which became the opening wedge for an expanding ecclesiastical structure.

A third type of polarity creating inner tension was the struggle with Gnosticism. Gnosticism is an expression of the desire to possess the Christian revelation in terms of already existing systems of religious thought, thus creating a Christian metaphysic. Where this tendency gains ground, it does so at the expense of reducing the prophetic spirit and character of Christianity. In the first centuries of the Christian era, Gnosticism became the problem that overshadowed all others for the Christian community.

Those who seek to find a single pattern of faith and order in the pages of the New Testament, which can be taken as the original and therefore normative pattern for the Christian community will certainly be disappointed. [Schweizer(1961), p. 26?] Instead we find a community in which a number of forces are in tension. The situation is different in different places, and the pattern changes from one locality to another. Every attempt to renew the church by “going back” to a point in time that is accepted as normative will end in confusion. There is no objectified pattern of church order that is fixed and immutable. The order that belongs to the gospel flows from our relationship with Christ. Christ is the orderer of his people in the same way that he is their priest and prophet and king, that is, by the dialogic relationship which takes place between the church and its head. The new way brings a new order.

The ordering of God’s people under the new covenant presupposes a daily, visibly gathered community that maintains a continuous conversational relationship with Christ. If the new covenant is not a “something” but a person, then it follows that God’s people in the new covenant find their order through the living relation that they experience with that person.

4 The Question of Typology

In the previous chapter it was stated that the cultic side of the Old Covenant prepares the way for the non cultic character of the New Covenant by foreshadowing it. This means that without knowing it, the Old Covenant priests, prophets, and kings were foreshadowing Christ, the eternal prophet, priest, and king who brings all types, shadows, and figures to an end and who is the substance to which they all point. The temporary dependence of the Hebrew people on counsellors and judges chosen by God is a shadow of the charismatic leadership never fully given until the arrival of the new covenant. The offerings and sacrifices typify the spiritual sacrifice that God calls for in the new covenant. The temple, circumcision, and the sabbath are features of the Old Covenant that re-emerge transformed in the new.

This method of relating the New and Old Covenants was begun by Paul and continued by the early church, but in recent years the typological interpretation has been under suspicion. John Bright says, “we are not permitted to attribute to the Bible writers ideas that they did not have,” [Bright(?), p. 18] but however salutary this advice may be, it must still be taken into account that the Bible writers are not the authors of Biblical events but that God is and that it is conceivable that he caused events to happen whose full significance was not apparent to the actors in them but could only be fully perceived in the light of subsequent events.

There is a new interest in typology, such as that of E. W. Heaton. “Allegorizing,” he says, “should be carefully distinguished from ‘typological’ interpretation . . . Whereas so-called allegorical interpretation fastens on trivial details of a text and uses them as flimsy foundation for an elaborate imaginative superstructure, typological interpretation finds in the Old Testament fundamental types of the relationship between God and his world, which are developed and filled out by the events of the New Testament (see

Rom. 5:14). Typological interpretation, therefore, does not read extraneous notions into the text, nor obliterate the distinction between Old and New Testaments. It helps, rather, to elucidate the great theological themes which express the unity of God's self-revelation." [Heaton(1958), p. 13] G. E. Wright also pleads for the admissibility of typology which, he claims, "when rightly understood and used takes historical data seriously; persons, acts, and events possess a typological meaning when they are understood to have been fixed and directed by God so that they point toward the future. They possess their own original historical significance, but the eye of faith can discern that God has also set them as previews or types which point to greater and more complete facts. Allegory on the other hand is not primarily concerned with history but with the hidden or spiritual double meanings which its user believes he can draw out from the words or events. When allegory is used all parts of scripture are made to say the same thing and the significance of history is set aside. Typology . . . in its proper sense . . . does not falsify history, but it deals with peculiar characteristics of Biblical history in which significant events point beyond themselves to their fulfillment. They are thus types of the greater events which fulfill them . . . [e.g.] the person and offices of Christ are seen in pure typological relation to the varying offices of the covenant community so that he fulfills them all in himself. Thus in Deut. 18:15-18 for example Moses speaks of the office of prophet which God will later establish. In the New Testament this passage is taken to refer . . . to Jesus (Acts 3:22-23). Typology . . . when properly defined, points to . . . a divinely directed, unique history wherein . . . one is enabled to see that the events of the Old Testament were meant by God to be preparatory events with the inner significance only partially understood by the original participants and only to be comprehended fully in Christ." [Wright(1963), pp. 61-65]

Typology implies that “the whole of the former period has been brought to completion and the new age is inaugurated.”

George Fox made extensive use of typology in his preaching. In his most famous sermon at Firbank Fell before an assembly of one thousand people he says, “I opened the prophets and figures and shadows and turned them to Christ the substance.” [Fox(1952), p. 109] At a meeting of “many thousands” in Bristol he reports that “the Lord Jesus Christ was set up who was the end of all figures and shadows and the law and first covenant.” [Fox(1952), p. 367]

Fox also asserts that “David’s . . . Mt. Zion and Jerusalem” were types of heavenly Jerusalem and Zion “and,” referring to the mountain in Isaiah 2:2-3 “to which all nations shall flow” he asks, “Is not this heavenly Mt. Zion and heavenly Jerusalem?” [Fox(1831), VI, p. 161]

5 The New Covenant and History

When we say that the risen Christ is the covenant and is therefore the sole authority, standard, or norm for the church’s morality and order, we must make it very clear that this does not mean that this is only a very roundabout way of removing the whole question of church order from the realm of history and putting it into a frame of reference which is as non-historical as mysticism.

The Christ who meets us as we gather in his name and who enlightens our conscience and draws us to God is one who is not merely an historical accident or a stage in some evolutionary religious development. He is the Lord of history, which means that it is he who, all along, has been revealing himself to men in history. Paul says that Moses and the fathers drank from the one spiritual rock which followed them, “and that Rock was Christ.” (I Cor. 10:4) Jesus said, “Before Abraham was, I am,” (John 8:58) and

“Abraham rejoiced to see my day” (John 8:56). Jesus identifies himself with the prophecies of Moses and the prophets, and he sees himself not as the culmination of a long evolutionary development but as the fulfillment of God’s plan for man’s redemption that has been gradually unfolding in holy history. The new covenant does not appear in history in order to negate history but in order to fulfill God’s purpose for it. If it was Jesus’ mission to emancipate mankind from historical conditioning and change the historically oriented old covenant into a non-historical new covenant, then the gospel story would have been very different from the story that has come down to us. To the cultivated mind of the Graeco-Roman culture, it seemed right and inevitable that if Christianity was to replace the old covenant then this meant that it must transcend and outgrow the historicism of the old covenant. From the very beginning there was an attempt to reduce the Christian revelation to a mystical system of timeless truth not tied to any historical events. This is the gnostic tendency which was the Church’s greatest enemy in the first century; and it is now present in the Christian world in greater strength than it has ever been since the first century.

No, Christ came, “in the fullness of time,” that is to say, in God’s time, according to God’s time-table, to inaugurate a new covenant by what he did and what he was and is. He is the fulfiller of holy history. But he is also the initiator of a new era in holy history. In him holy history finds its midpoint and the course of holy history is redirected. God’s call for a holy people is no longer mixed up with ethnic and cultic elements, but the true universalism of God’s promise to Abraham and his prophecies through prophets like Joel has now become a reality. Universal salvation through the faithfulness of God’s people is not something that we wait for. It has come. (John the Baptist said, “Now is Salvation come on all flesh.” (Luke 3:6, quoting Is. 52:18)) The day of the Lord or “acceptable year of the Lord” or “year of God’s favor” is not an event in the future; but

it is an event which has taken place, not at the very end of history, but in the middle of history. “The last days” or “the day of Christ” or “the day of the Lord” is the whole period in which God will redeem history through a community ruled by Christ. Holy history since Christ is the story of gathering people to Christ and of realizing in history a universal community that lives under God’s and Christ’s rule. The coming of Christ does not bring history to an end. Jesus changed the identification that the Jews made between God’s day and the end of history. He proclaimed the acceptable year of the Lord, but not as a day in which God would then and there destroy his enemies, justify his faithful people, and bring history to an end. His omission of the phrase, “and the eternal vengeance of our God,” [Luke 4:18-19, quoting Isaiah 61:1-2] was noted by his hearers and it was because he proclaimed God’s day without proclaiming it in these terms that they were offended. The day of God did not come at the end of history as the Jews expected but in the middle of history. Christian eschatology sees the time of the new covenant as the time of “eschatology in the process of realization.” [Jeremias(1958), p. 75] This means that “the missionary task is a part of the final fulfillment, a divine factual demonstration of the exaltation of the son of man.” [Jeremias(1958), p. 75] The day of the Lord has come but the final consummation has not come. Does this mean then that the Christian community has merely inherited from the Jews the role of waiting for God’s final disclosure of his will and purpose for history. No, the Christian believes that God has revealed himself fully and finally in Christ. We do not wait for a revelation that is greater. Our task is to realize in history the righteousness and community that are made possible under the new covenant. The final consummation is not a time of fuller revelation but a time of judgement. We have no clue as to when this end will come, and our response to God is not conditioned by some belief or expectation or speculation about when the end will come. Jesus says this is

something about which man knows nothing and about which he will never know anything in advance of the event. It is of the nature of the end that it will come unexpectedly, “like a thief in the night.”

The Christian era is therefore not a mere “interim” in which men are left waiting for a fuller and better revelation of God than the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are not a people drifting and struggling along with “interim ethics” and “interim churches” until God gives us a fuller revelation in the end of time. As far as the revelation is concerned, we have had it and it is therefore of crucial importance whether or not we respond to it and by responding bring into history the righteousness and community that are made possible by the gospel. Either the gospel is the power of God unto salvation to all that believe, or it is not. If it is such a universal power, then this power will make itself felt in society and in history, which is the field where God has chosen to reveal himself and make his power felt.

We, then, who have been called by God into God’s holy community under the new covenant, are engaged in a demonstration of God’s power of the greatest possible social and historical significance.

by Lewis Benson

{*Editor's note: The following citations were incomplete in the original document. For the most part they contained only the name of the author and the principal title. The W. A. Visser t'Hooft quote gave no source for the quotation. The the rest of the bibliographical information presented below is based on data found on World Cat (WorldCat.org). Where multiple editions were listed, those closest to the 1950s were used in the citation.*}

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