



## Experience in the Church and the Work of Theology

A Perspective on “Theology for Christian Ministry”\*

CLAUS WESTERMANN

Professor Emeritus of Old Testament, Ruprecht-Karl-Universität, Heidelberg, Germany

### I. PRE- AND POST-WAR EXPERIENCES

My career as a teacher of theology began at the church seminary (*kirchliche Hochschule*) in Berlin-Zehlendorf a few years after the end of World War II. It was an extraordinary situation—in part because a large number of the beginning theological students were older than was usual and were marked by the experiences of the war and the intense suffering brought on by the collapse of everything at war’s end; in part because of the peculiarity of the seminary, which had grown out of the *Kirchenkampf* (church struggle), out of the confessing church’s opposition to National Socialism—even within the official church.

In this situation the need to make a close connection between congregational work and theological teaching was unquestioned by both teachers and students. It was an opportune time for a strong coalescence of “academic” theology (determined by disciplined study) and “pastoral” theology (determined by practical requirements). It would be misleading to say that the church seminaries produced a basic transformation in the relation between the academic and the pastoral, but the many particular experiences we brought into our theological teaching could and did have significant effects, even though these may not have been conspicuously noticeable to an outside observer. For me personally, it was only during the *Kirchenkampf* that I found out that the individual church-goer was not merely a

\*Translated by Frederick J. Gaiser.

passive observer of a performance, but could take a large and active part in worship. For the first time, I experienced something like community; singing became confession of faith, and I understood something of what the Psalms mean by the praise of God. When, during worship, the names of the pastors who had been arrested were read, we experienced first-hand: “If one member suffers, all suffer together.”

But the political situation also had its effect on our teaching—first simply through our memories of the war and the collapse, but then also because for the first few years students from both east and west were able to study together at the seminary in Berlin. This made it completely impossible for our theological work to ignore the political questions of a divided nation.

To mention just one example: the individualistic pietism, concerned only for the religious self and personal salvation, that continued to be strongly maintained by our parents and grandparents was no longer comprehensible to us. We were much too burdened by the question

why we as Christians had not been able to resist more firmly the rise of National Socialism. Shouldn't we have been able to stand up against it, in the name of God, at the outset? A church and a theology which desired only to remain private was no longer possible for us.

## II. THE REDISCOVERY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

This change meant that after the war the Old Testament took on a greater significance in our seminaries and university theological faculties, a significance which it had never previously enjoyed to the same degree. This is when the German church realized what had happened when the Old Testament lost its importance for the church. The political leadership of our country had demanded that the Christian churches separate themselves from the Old Testament; one group—the German Christians, with their *Reichsbischof* Ludwig Müller—was prepared to accept this governmental requirement. It was not so far-fetched! At the beginning of the century the well-known theologian Adolf von Harnack had already demanded that the church give up the Old Testament as part of the Bible.

When the state demanded this, we should instead have begun to pay attention to the message of the prophets. Israel's prophets raised accusations against the kings when these acted unjustly, against the will and the commandments of God. But the prophetic message had almost totally lost its significance for the church. There were almost never sermons on texts from the prophetic books. These texts never came up in religious instruction. The congregations heard from the prophets in worship in virtually only one connection: to announce the coming of the Messiah. That was seen as their only meaning for the church. This is the primary reason that only a very few people resisted in God's name during the Third Reich: the Christian church had silenced the prophets.

The state's demand that we renounce the Old Testament as the Bible of the Jews became an occasion for us young theologians to do intensive work on this book. We were sent to a practical seminary (*Predigerseminar*) which had students from both camps. The Old Testament was hotly contested in our discussions. Was it worth it to stand up for this book as an integral part of the Bible and thereby to bring suffering upon oneself?

In these discussions we made a genuine discovery. For we had come out of a

tradition in which the Old Testament, if not totally ignored, was largely reinterpreted from the perspective of the New Testament or of dogmatics. That the Old Testament had something to say on its own was not recognized. We got some help at first from a book by the Swiss theologian Wilhelm Vischer, *The Witness of the Old Testament to Christ*; but its Christian reading of the Old Testament texts went so far that it left the Old Testament itself with little to say. In the same way, the Old Testament sections in Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* sometimes deviated so far from what the text said that it was of no help. So, we were left to our own meager knowledge and the contradictory comments of various interpreters. None of us had received a solid basis for the interpretation of Old Testament texts during our theological studies. I still remember passionate discussions about the understanding of the psalms. I think our naivete helped us in the process.

The question of creation provides a model for the changes that were occurring in those days. I remember reading a book on creation written by a dogmatician. The Bible, i.e., what the

Bible says about the creator and creation, was never mentioned. To the theologians of that generation the Bible had nothing more to say about creation and the creator; the dogmatists knew better about those things. That is why, although the Christian churches retained their confession, “I believe in God, the Creator....,” this confession no longer meant anything to them. They had capitulated to the natural sciences without a fight. The origins of the world and of the human had become the province of science; theologians had nothing more to contribute to the conversation. Existentialism also played an important role in that regard. Theologians wanted to center everything on the human being and the human relationship with God.

But in the middle of all that we discovered that if we wanted to hold on to the whole Bible, Old Testament and New, we could only do that by believing in a God who holds *everything* in his hands—where “everything” includes the entire creation and encompasses both beginning and end. For to speak of God means to speak of the whole.

And precisely what fascinated us in our rediscovery of the Old Testament was the realization that the God of the Bible is involved with all of reality. If this is true, then speaking about God as creator takes on a new meaning. The old controversy—Which is right, the Bible or the natural sciences?—had been doomed from the beginning; in a changed world it made no sense any longer. As I, along with several others, asked myself whether the Old Testament really is a necessary part of the Christian Bible, I discovered step by step that the Old Testament actually does have to do with the whole world, the whole of our reality. For it tells a story that leads from the beginning to the end, one in which everything that exists has its part, simply because everything is God’s creation. The question is no longer how the world and the human race came into being (the biblical wisdom tradition, especially in Ecclesiastes, speaks emphatically about the limitations of our ability to comprehend these matters); the question is whether we understand ourselves in the present moment as creatures of God and whether we understand the world in which we now live as God’s creation.

The theological recognition of what the Bible means when it speaks of creation and creator has a direct effect on the preaching, the instruction, and the activity of every congregation. If it is now within human power to destroy the human race and

the planet earth, then to speak of God only makes sense if what the Bible says is true—that God is the creator and Lord of the cosmos.

But then our talk about God as creator of humankind must also change. To understand it, we must pay attention to the whole creation story. Only as a whole can it tell us what is meant by the creation of the human. It is not enough to say that the creator produced a man and then a woman. Much more belongs to human creation—the environment in which God places them; the nourishment and foodstuffs God makes available to them; the work God gives them (in the commission to till and keep the garden—a move toward civilization); the community of man and woman, which requires language—and all of this encompassed within the relationship between people and God. Only then do we have a true human being, the true creature of God. That is how the whole Bible speaks about people. It knows nothing of an abstract human; we are human only in the concrete relationships which constitute our lives.

### III. THE LANGUAGE OF THE BIBLE: THE BIBLE TELLS A STORY

We have still never succeeded in bridging the gap between the language developed and employed in academic circles and the language of everyday people. During the days when I was newly discovering the Old Testament and becoming acquainted with the many different kinds of language in the biblical books, I made an observation which opened up many things for me: the language at the beginning of both the Old and New Testaments is simple; it is the language of simple narration. Later on, the language becomes more difficult, more complex; it becomes characterized more by thoughts than by events. It occurred to me that elementary speech in the Bible is narrative. That observation was confirmed by experiences made during the hard years of the war. In a book about his life as a Russian prisoner, *Unwilling Journey*, Helmut Gollwitzer, a leading theologian of the Confessing Church, tells how again and again he was asked by his fellow prisoners of war to tell stories and how the unbearable conditions of the camp were alleviated by this narration. I remember guard duty on a bitterly cold night near Kursk when I related half the story of the Old Testament. The short, simple narratives of both Old and New Testaments have an elementary character. It is impossible to exhaust the expressive power of these stories. They say something new, something never before discovered, in every different situation.

The hard post-war years after the collapse brought many new experiences. The Berlin newspapers listed every morning the names of those who had starved or frozen to death. But when, as it sometimes happened, someone was saved from starvation by an act of charity, that was told and retold. The Gospel accounts of the feeding miracles took on a new reality for us. We saw that these stories could only be understood by hearing them alongside the stories of the rescue of God's wandering people in the wilderness. This made me realize that the Bible speaks about bread in different ways: on the one hand, the bread which blesses; on the other hand, the bread which saves. The Lord's Prayer speaks of our daily bread, given by God as part of his blessing of creation. But the narratives, where it is a matter of life and death, speak of saving bread. Through such experiences it became clear to me that it was necessary to distinguish between the saving and the blessing work of God,

and that both had a necessary place in the story of God's dealings with people. If Christian churches would recognize and pay attention to this distinction, those who daily enjoy the bread of God's blessing would surely think more about those for whom a piece of bread can mean deliverance from impending death.

Like the narrative, the cry or call (*der Ruf*) also has great significance in the language of the Bible. A recurrent sentence in the Abraham stories is this: "And he called on the name of the Lord." Characteristic of the cry, in contrast to normal speech, is first that it calls across a distance and second that it is always reactive. Something must precede the cry—whether it's the cry of need or the cry of joy. I have noticed, as have many others, that in situations of greatest stress, in moments where survival is the issue, people speak only in short principal sentences. There are no dependent clauses! In these situations, language approaches the exclamations of the earliest human speech. In conversation with someone else who had made the same observation, we realized that elementary situations give rise to elementary speech.

This observation afforded me a new entry into the Psalms. I noticed that the prayers of the Psalter are different than our prayers. The two primary types of psalms are psalms of lament and

psalms of praise—cries out of the depths of distress or joyful shouts of one rescued from such distress. Our prayers, however, are far removed from these elementary cries to God. The crisis of prayer in our day, when so many people perceive and say that they can no longer pray, is related to our loss of this elementary character of the cry to God. One cannot understand what the Bible says about prayer without beginning with the Psalter's distinction between cries of lament and cries of praise. (In the historical books of the Bible, we hear *two* prayers by only one of Israel's kings—one is praise, the other is lament!) The division of the Psalter into lament and praise certainly means more than the fact that these two types exist. Lament and praise characterize a journey that goes over the heights and through the depths. These psalms portray the rhythm of life, the movement of every human life between joy and suffering—a rhythm like that of breathing. Perhaps this recognition, won from the texts of the psalms, can restore the meaning of prayer for some who have long since given up on it. This rhythm, which every person knows, can bring connectedness and thereby meaning to life.

In contrast to the elementary forms of speech found in the narrative and the cry, the Bible contains also a form of speaking characterized rather by thought, the language of reflection. This is sometimes introduced, "When I consider..." (Job 23:15). It is easy to understand that for many these reflective elements in the Bible, which ascribe meaning to events, are more important than the events themselves. For example, many regard the Gospel of John as more important than the three Synoptic Gospels, because John's reflective contents—the meaning he gives to events—appear to be more weighty. It is of utmost significance that in biblical exegesis and in all theological endeavors a clear distinction be made between texts with an event structure and texts with a reflective structure. For as a whole, the Bible tells a story; its basic framework is shaped by the events which move from a beginning to an end. Texts with a thought structure—reflections and meanings—are, without exception, to be understood in relation to this basic framework.

#### IV. BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

The material of the previous section related to the Bible as a whole and can only be understood in that connection. A new theological task, seen today in many places, is the search for a so-called biblical theology, a theology that ties together Old and New Testaments. The situation is different, of course, in different parts of the church. As far as I can tell, the English-speaking churches had always given a greater significance to the Old Testament than the German-speaking churches. Among the latter, it was regularly the case that worship, sermon, hymns, and prayers all had their basis only in the New Testament. If one asked what the Bible had to say about the state, the answer was sought only in the New Testament. Although it was and is claimed that the Christian Bible consists of both Old and New Testaments, in reality it was and is only the New Testament that is granted biblical authority. It was only the *Kirchenkampf* that brought a partial change. In addition, the post-war concern for reparations to the Jews has kindled a growing interest in the "Old Testament" as the Bible of Israel—the Hebrew Bible. This interest continues to grow and has effected considerable rethinking. And now—finally—there is serious consideration given to the Jewish interpretation of the Torah.

"Biblical theology" (for several years the Neukirchener Verlag has published a *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie*) asks, from several perspectives, what connects Old and New Testament

and what distinguishes them. It becomes clear once more that if we say Jesus Christ is the middle of time, then we also have to ask about the whole whose middle he is; the middle can only be determined by seeing the whole. We see again the significance of the simple fact that the Bible—Old and New Testaments together—relates a story which leads from beginning to end, from the creation of the world to its ending, and that this story has to do with the whole world and the whole human race. And then it goes without saying that God, the Father of Jesus Christ, is concerned with everything in all its fullness, with the entire creation and all of human history, with the smallest and the greatest.

## V. WISDOM

Only in my later years have I seriously occupied myself with the wisdom tradition; I deeply regret not having done this much sooner. These books remain almost unknown; apart from a few specialists, almost no one regards them as worth reading or of any importance whatsoever. But we need to ask in what ways precisely this material can be made accessible for a “pastoral theology.” No book of the Bible speaks so abundantly and so thoughtfully about human beings and human affairs as Proverbs. Nowhere else are we shown how wit and humor belong to human speech, how observation and experience of the beautiful and the difficult take on a linguistic form which is transmitted from parents to children as a precious tradition. Such proverbs assume the activity of God in the reality they describe.

What is said here about humans (and also about God) corresponds in part to the wisdom of other peoples—not only, as has long been recognized and taught, to the wisdom of Egypt and Mesopotamia, but also to the wisdom sayings of various pre-literate peoples throughout the earth. Exhortations to help the poor, the hungry, the oppressed, and the victims of injustice, for example, occur in all proverbial collections—biblical, Egyptian, Sumerian, and Akkadian, in African, Batak, and

others. All proverbs urge discretion and warn against people with no self-control. We also find proverbs which correspond to the command to love the enemy.

The Proverbs preserve human experiences and observations which can be made anywhere, but the words become meaningful here where they seek to say something particular to the person being addressed: “Human breath is the lamp of the Lord, searching all his innermost parts” (Prov 20:27, author’s translation); “As no two faces are ever alike, unlike, too, are the hearts of men” (Prov 27:19, *Jerusalem Bible*); “Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to behold the sun” (Eccl 11:7).

The book of Proverbs also bears witness to the fact that there is much more agreement between the Old Testament and the New than has previously been seen or admitted. About 80-100 sayings from Proverbs turn up again in the Synoptic Gospels as words of Jesus. Jesus took these from the proverbial wisdom of his people. As a child or young man he heard them from the ordinary people among whom he lived, and later he inserted them into his preaching. There are also several parables and a few brief narratives (e.g., the infertile fig tree) which grow out of maxims.

In the wisdom literature as in the narratives of the primeval history, the Bible participates in a humanity which is common to all people. As a part of the Bible, wisdom serves to bring

together different peoples and different times.

\*A German congregation also encourages the work described in the subtitle of this journal: "Theology for Christian Ministry."

The Sexauer Congregational Prize, founded in 1982, is given every year to a theologian who, in addition to doing academic work, seeks also to serve local Christian congregations, writing in non-technical language. The selection is made by a group from the congregation in Sexau, a village in South Baden, after reading materials of the suggested candidates. The prize ceremony includes a sermon and a lecture by the winner. [Translator's note: Professor Westermann received the Sexauer Congregational Prize in 1983. His lecture on that occasion, "*Das Beten der Psalmen und unser Beten*," appeared in *Zeichen der Zeit* 40 (1986) 243-247.]