



The Bible and the Life of Faith: A Personal Reflection¹

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I. THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

I cannot say that my theological education provided the foundation for my life's work. It was more of an isolated episode. Actually, it had not even been my intention to study theology; but I finished my first theological exams at the Evangelical Consistorium in Berlin in 1933, the year the National Socialists seized power.

After we had passed our exams we were asked by the church whether we wanted to serve as vicars under a pastor of the Confessing Church or under a German-Christian. I chose the former and was sent to Arnswalde, not far from Stettin (now in Poland). There, for good or ill, I did my job (perhaps more ill than good).

Then I was sent by the church to a practical seminary (*Predigerseminar*) in Frankfurt/Oder. It had been newly established under the leadership of German-Christian pastors and assigned the task of coercing the candidates, sometimes under massive threats, to subordinate themselves to the new "*Reichsbischof*" Müller. To that end, we were called in for individual interviews and worked on by the director of the seminary. It was easy for me: I declined, without further ado. For

¹A somewhat longer form of this article appeared first under the title "Ein Rückblick" in *Theologische Beiträge* 23/4 (1992) 223-232. This edited translation was prepared by Frederick J. Gaiser and is printed here with permission. Professor Westermann presented the original essay to Klaus Haacker, the editor of *Theologische Beiträge*, on the occasion of his 50th birthday.

others, those who were dependent on financial aid, things were very difficult; they were subjected to brutal pressure. All the while we were being given instruction meant to influence us in the German-Christian direction. It was a time of passionate struggle, and for the first time I understood what I had gotten into with this theological education. A division arose among us 21 candidates. Thirteen were prepared to resist the seminary's German-Christian leadership; a few of our group remained undecided; the others chose to support the German-Christian leaders—though, to be sure, for political reasons, not for theological or ecclesiastical ones. There were fierce disputes, but they remained verbal. When the pressure to sign on the dotted line to support the *Reichsbischof* didn't let up, one day our group of 13 left the seminary. That meant losing our salaries as vicars and pastors, which made it very hard for those who had no means. We 13 took our belongings and traveled to Berlin-Dahlem, to the leading pastor in the Confessing Church—the church in opposition to the *Reichsbischof*—Pastor Niemöller. On the very next day after our arrival, he was able to get a seminar of the Confessing Church established

in his parish house. Pastors from Berlin were commissioned to teach us, but several hours each day we met in working groups that we led ourselves.

Things did not remain so improvised. The Silesian Church had fired the director of a Silesian practical seminary, Dr. Glöge; but since they could not remove him from the pastoral office, he remained in his parsonage-apartment (in the same building as the seminary) and appealed to the leadership of the Confessing Church (i.e., Pastor Niemöller). Niemöller replied: “This is easy: You have a seminary building without candidates; I have candidates without a seminary. So you get the candidates from Frankfurt!” On the next day, the 13 of us happily traveled to Naumburg (near Görlitz), to the seminary. We were accompanied by our new director, Dr. Glöge, who had introduced himself to us at the commuter station before our journey. But we hadn’t figured on the Nazi state police. We were met in Naumburg by the police, a large dog, and the remaining seminarians, who had been instructed by telephone to prevent us from setting foot in the Naumburg Seminary. There was nothing left for us to do but to move into the director’s office and make do with whatever we could find. I can still see the book cases we made out of orange crates. Yet, despite all the excitement and trouble, the seminary instruction continued on the very next day.

The others—the German-Christians—had barricaded the entrance that led from the pastor’s apartment to the seminary rooms. They didn’t study much, but they drank a lot of beer.

Since Dr. Glöge was the only one who could teach us, we had to form study groups, which we took turns leading. I remember one study group on the Psalms where we discussed whether or not we could recognize the Psalter as a part of our Christian Bible. That was the issue in dispute between the two parties: the German-Christians rejected the Old Testament as part of the Christian Bible. We translated psalms from Hebrew and exegeted them as best we could. That was my first serious encounter with the psalms or with the Old Testament in general. I had never experienced such intense inquiry during my own seminary education. But

now it was very different for us—a question of our very existence. I continued this same kind of inquiry, under totally different conditions, during the war and in a Russian POW camp. Eventually, through a series of detours, all of this led to my later work as a teacher.

The practical seminary in Naumburg prepared me for teaching in yet another way: it was there I first became a theologian. What I mean is that, for the first time, I experienced a passion for theological questions and investigation; that passion gripped me so that I have never been able to get loose. Naturally, there was no possibility of a regular teaching job at that time. The church was being oppressed by the Nazi government, and there were already plans to eliminate it altogether. The Old Testament, which was of special interest to me, was hated as a Jewish book that should be silenced at all costs. But this hopeless situation could not change the fact that my questions and investigations, focused on the Bible, never let up. And one thing more: in our study groups in Naumburg, there were no lectures or lecturers. The actual work took place in conversation. All of us—excepting only our director—were equal.

II. IN JAIL

The “German-Christians,” who had been occupying the rooms of the seminary, soon gave up. They turned the key over to the mayor and disappeared. Thus failed the first and only attempt

by the Nazi-Church to open its own seminary. We were able to move out of the cramped and constricting apartment into the rooms of the seminary (the building was an old nunnery) and work without being disturbed.

One Saturday, the pastor from Tiefenfurt (about 20 km. away) called and asked for someone to fill in for his worship service the next day. He was under arrest and not allowed to conduct the service. The occasion for his arrest was a proclamation by the church of the old Prussian union announcing to all congregations that the “German faith” (“*Deutschglaube*”) was not a Christian religion. All the pastors who intended to make this proclamation were arrested. I was chosen to travel to Tiefenfurt for the service. When I arrived at the parsonage, I was asked by the police officer on duty whether or not I was prepared to conduct the service without the proclamation. I said that I, too, would read the proclamation, and was immediately placed under house arrest. Many people came to church on Sunday. Conducted by the pastor’s wife and one of the elders, it consisted of Bible reading, prayer, and singing. Meanwhile, the pastor and I, along with the police officers, were holding our own devotions in the office at the parsonage. On Sunday afternoon, a higher police official arrived from Liegnitz and took us to jail there. I will never forget the moment when the heavy iron door slammed shut behind me and the keeper turned the key. Something of my human dignity was taken away from me. Everyone involved knew, of course, that the punishment was not justified, but was instead a brutal abuse of power. To be sure, we were kept in jail only a little more than a week (and then let out without explanation), but something had been destroyed for me.

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Later, I was again imprisoned a couple of times. Once I was locked in a wire cage in the corner of a large office; next to me people were walking around freely. There I experienced again that deathly feeling of powerlessness that I wish on no one.

Then came the war. Shortly after it began, I was drafted. In one respect, the war was my teacher, even if a hard one. I had with me only the New Testament with the Psalms, which I retained even in Russian POW camp. The Bible was no longer merely an uplifting book, as it had been in my childhood and my parental home. Life had gotten too hard for that. The only thing in the Bible with enduring value was that which spoke directly to my present existence. First and foremost, that was the psalms. So, already during the *Kirchenkampf* I began my intensive work with the psalms—including the question of the Old Testament’s place in the Bible and its present-day meaning. Under the influence of my wartime experiences, I realized that the people who had written and prayed the psalms understood prayer differently than we do. Prayer was closer to life, closer to the reality in which they lived, than is true with us. For us, prayer is something a person does or is admonished to do—a human act. But in the Psalter, crying to God grows out of life itself; it is a reaction to the experiences of life, a cry from the heart.

III. A PRISONER OF WAR

After the German defeat, I became a prisoner of the Russians. I need not mention that this was even a harder school; I still don’t know how I emerged from it alive. Even though the struggle for survival occupied us completely and demanded all our energy, I never quit asking questions and thinking about things. I observed how the speech of those in prison limited itself to things that were absolutely necessary, how people spoke only in short basic sentences, how

language centered primitively on material things, how, for example, saying “thank you” stopped altogether. Thinking about that, I realized that there was no word for “thanks” in the psalms! I saw again that the language of the Bible was closer to reality than the language of the church, and I asked myself why. When we sometimes held devotions in the prison yard (although this was forbidden), I noticed the oppressive distance between our church talk and the reality of prisoners’ lives—especially when one of them joined our circle, listened for a few minutes, and then wandered away with a blank look.

Again, I thought about the psalms and tried to relate my own wartime thoughts to the Psalter. In doing so, I sat on a block of wood and wrote on a board held on my knees. Sometimes I traded bread for paper. This was the origin of my later book *The Praise of God in the Psalms*, with no Hebrew text; in fact, with no books at all. The war made me encounter the psalms in a totally unacademic and unscientific way, and it became very important for me to see that the people who gave rise to the Psalter were simple and ordinary; they were not what we would call highly intellectual or cultivated, but folks who had rather simple ideas, who earned their living with their hands, and who, as a result, were close to the earth, the stars, and all creatures—as the psalms make clear. My thinking about those

things was the same as that of the women and men in the Psalter, and that has remained with me until this day. Just consider this (as I discovered for myself): when we read the psalms, we meet at every step the world in which we ourselves live—the earth, trees and houses, fields and work, tears and laughter. In this sense, the psalms are thoroughly secular literature.

Many years later, when I was commissioned to write the Genesis commentary, and then devoted 20 years of my life to this project, what I had learned from the psalms was broadened and deepened: Broadened in that, in order to explain Genesis, I had to investigate the history of the religions surrounding and preceding Israel—even though that work, which far exceeds the abilities of one person, had to remain fragmentary. Moreover, I had to learn something about how early peoples (not only those of the Near East but also far beyond) gained and passed on a body of knowledge that in many ways coincides with what the Bible says in its first eleven chapters (the primeval history). Many reports from all over the world speak of one creator of the world and one creator of the human race; further, their talk of the beginnings of the world and of the human race corresponds to their talk of the end, in the same way the biblical story relates the language of creation to the language of the flood.

My earlier work was deepened primarily when I discovered through my research that the human race throughout the world holds much more in common than I had previously suspected, and that this fact is significant for our talk about God, for our theology—not only, as the primeval history shows, that when the Bible speaks of God, it means the whole (“To speak of God means to speak of the whole”), but more, that speaking of God leads to the conclusion that there is really only one human story, a story of human community that is wonderfully unfolded in the ancestral history that follows the primeval history: the story of Abraham depicts the primal relationship between parents and children; the story of Jacob and Esau develops the relationship of siblings to one another; and the Joseph story unfolds a parent-brother-brothers relationship.

I was deeply moved to see that in the Joseph story, where the text speaks of the basic relationships of human community, one of the brothers is prepared, for the first time, to take

great suffering upon himself for the sake of another. Then when I wrote a commentary on Second Isaiah (Isaiah 40-66), I found the goal of the prophet's message, after the collapse of the state and the monarchy, to be the word about God's servant: "Upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed." This material is significant for the relationship between the Old and New Testaments: the idea that one suffers for the whole, bringing peace to all humanity, relates to the history of the whole human race; this is portrayed in the Old Testament both in its broad perspective and in its narrative details. It is a journey that leads from creation through all forms of human society, from the family to the empire. As early as the end of the ancestral history, peace can be maintained only when one assumes punishment, guilt, and suffering for the others. And the human journey, with all its branches and intricacies, in all its social

forms, and with all its recurrent breaking of the peace, leads finally to one who dies for others.

IV. PROPOSALS FOR EXEGETES AND THEOLOGIANS

These few remarks will show that from the beginning I regarded the Bible, both Old and New Testament, as a unity, and thus never saw the need for a special "biblical theology." That one should use one method to study the Old Testament, another method for the New Testament, and yet a third to bring the two together has always seemed to me to be absurd and short-sighted. Moreover, the tendency in recent decades to grasp at newer and newer exegetical methods, giving them new names as soon as they are announced (usually borrowed from somewhere else), has seemed to me more and more like grasping at wind. I have similar reservations about the ambitious need of theologians to use new and different foreign words to describe their work. The earliest parts of both Old and New Testaments employed a simple, basic, and everyday language. The more abstract and exalted scholarly language comes only later; rather than uniting things, it separates them. This is no less true in the New Testament than in the Old. If we want to find those things held in common, those things that unite us, we must look not in the later texts, but in the simple language of the earlier ones.

Another idea occurred to me only late in my career: For many exegetical monographs, especially dissertations, the language used by the exegete moves at such a high, abstract, and exalted level that there is no longer any connection between the language of the interpreter and the simple language of the texts being interpreted. When that happens, the whole meaning and function of interpretation has been lost. The interpreter is no longer interpreting the text but rather his or her inventions about the text. Unhappily this is not a rare occurrence. As interpretations of texts, such efforts are worthless.

I'll add one more thought. The tools we use in exegesis, even the exegesis of the Old Testament, are primarily concepts taken from the Greek and Latin world. Many of these are imported from the interpretation of the New Testament, others come from medieval dogmatics. No one has ever questioned whether or not this is justified or appropriate, since these are the terms that seem to make Old Testament exegesis scientific, giving this work the character of an academic discipline. When I voiced doubts about all this among colleagues or students, people looked at me funny. As an example, the term "eschatology" (first used by Calov in 1677) is unnecessary and inappropriate for Old Testament exegesis. The Old Testament knows nothing of

an eschat-ology. What it says about the future or about future events never takes the form of a doctrine; the sayings exist in many different contexts and can only be understood and explained individually within those contexts. For example, announcements of the future, expectations of the future, and descriptions of the future (the last occurring in apocalyptic) are quite different things; they can never be brought together in a single logical system, as the term eschatology seems to promise. If a collective term is needed, “speech about the

future” or “speech about future events” would be completely adequate and raise no inappropriate expectations.

The epoch in which the exegete’s equipment included without question Greco-Latin terminology and concepts is coming to an end. I mention two indications of that: First, western Old Testament scholars have finally begun to listen to the long neglected Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament. This interpretive tradition makes very little or no use of the Greco-Latin apparatus. As an example, consider the Genesis commentary by Benno Jacob, which I studied carefully during work on my own commentary. No one can claim Jacob’s is not a scientific commentary. Yet, I was pleased to note that his argumentation is largely free of a one-sided conceptual language that, as he realized, is not appropriate to the Old Testament.

I know full well the consequences of what I am suggesting here; they cut into the very scientific nature of the study of theology. Theology as a science arose in the third and fourth centuries out of the attempts by a church increasingly becoming worldwide to be equal to the claims of Greco-Roman scholarship. That move was needed and justified in its time. But, in the different situation of the present, attempts to make theology scientific by the use of elevated language are no longer appropriate. They also have little effect. To continue the still essential conversation with other disciplines, a conversation aimed at serving, helping, and learning, *theology needs the fullest academic rigor, its own scholarly competence, and a recovery of the biblical commission that undergirds its existence and brings it back to its original and peculiar character as a biblical theology.*

Another perspective relating to the end of the old epoch of exegesis is this: A Christian church aware of its developing ecumenical character dare no longer force the study of the Old Testament into a western European mold, dominated by Latin and Greek concepts, so that students of the Old Testament in India or Central Africa can only have a voice if they become familiar with western terminology. A scholarly language which insists on these methods will soon lose its significance anyway, if only because there will be too few people who have any interest in it.

The way theology has taken over the scholarly language of the enlightenment as though it were self-evident has become particularly problematic in the understanding of history. *It is no longer possible for theology to work with an understanding of history which has no place for God or the work of God.*²

Finally, let me point to one more consequence of what I believe I have learned and experienced. Dividing theology into more and more individual disciplines, as we have done in recent decades, has been a mistake—in fact, a very dangerous mistake, which can lead to a complete disintegration of academic theology. Already, teachers and students in the various theological disciplines are often no longer able to understand one another, even when they are

using the same words.

²See C. Westermann, "Kirchengeschichte und Geschichte Israels," in *Prophetie und geschichtliche Wirklichkeit im alten Israel: Festschrift für Siegfried Herrmann*, ed. R. Liwak and S. Wagner (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1991) 425-428.

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We must abandon this ongoing process of dividing theology into more and more branches, bringing more and more estrangement. The emergence of a biblical theology, attempting to bridge at least one of the gaps, is a sign of hope. But it does not yet represent the complete conversion that is required. *That conversion will arrive only when all disciplines of academic theology understand themselves to be biblical theology and, as biblical theology, move together in the same direction.*³

³This translation omits material in the original German essay that parallels what Professor Westermann has written earlier for this journal in his essay "Experience in the Church and the Work of Theology," *Word & World* 10/1 (1990) 7-13. There, as in the German version of the present essay, Westermann describes how much of what became characteristic of his work (focusing on the movement in the psalms from lament to praise, distinguishing between the saving and the blessing work of Yahweh, the emphasis on the place of creation in Old Testament theology, and his later interest in the wisdom literature) grew out of the kind of life experiences he describes here.

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