



## **Resurrection or Justification of the Ungodly: What Basis for a Biblical Theology?**

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The search for a hermeneutic that will unite the proclamation of the Old and New Testaments is continuing. Ernst Käsemann's student, Peter Stuhlmacher, has followed him in much of his work. In recent years, however, Stuhlmacher has parted from Käsemann's commitment to the theology of the cross as the center of scripture. He has asserted a new foundation for biblical theology, one to be found in the third article of the Apostle's Creed, i.e., the belief in the resurrection of the dead. What has occasioned this move? What hermeneutics are at work in Käsemann's and in Stuhlmacher's work that can provide a glimpse into this parting of ways?

A window into their thought is found in their respective work on Rom 4:1-25. Each has written on the faith of Abraham in this passage in a way that reveals his own essential hermeneutics.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ernst Käsemann, *Perspectives on Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 89. The primary essay used from this volume is entitled "The Faith of Abraham in Romans 4."

Peter Stuhlmacher, *Schriftauslegung auf dem Wege zur biblischen Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975) 41. Most quotations in this paper are from an essay in this volume entitled (in English) "The Confession of Jesus' Resurrection and Biblical Theology." For a more recent introduction to Stuhlmacher's work, see his *How to Do Biblical Theology* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1995).

### I. SECOND AND THIRD ARTICLE APPROACHES

Käsemann deduces that the justification of the ungodly by faith is the center of the Romans 4 text. He identifies v. 5 as the central formula of the chapter: "But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness."

Käsemann identifies the thesis of 3:21ff. as the context which guides Romans 4. The nature of Christian faith according to Paul's understanding "must here also be summed up in its essentials. According to Rom 3:21-31 this center is belief in justification."<sup>2</sup>

Käsemann holds this to be Paul's main doctrine, grounding his theology in a second article confession ("I believe in Jesus Christ, our Lord, who..."). The point at issue is the center of Paul's and also Käsemann's theology. This center forms not just the understanding of Romans 4 and the understanding of Paul's theology, but also Paul's biblical hermeneutic. Käsemann notes that one must remember that at the time of Paul's interpretation a controversy flared up concerning the true interpretation of scripture and that for the first time the problem of a Christian hermeneutic became a theological theme.

Romans 4 holds a key place in the epistle. Here the scriptural evidence is marshaled for the theme of the righteousness of faith which has been expounded in 3:21-3:31. This only has a point if the faith of Abraham in some respects anticipates Christian faith and was, ultimately speaking, even identical with it.<sup>3</sup>

Abraham's role in the text then, is twofold. It identifies the justification of the ungodly as the central theme of scripture, but also establishes this belief as the hermeneutic link between the Old and New Testaments.

Contrary to the present trend, I should like to maintain the provocative thesis that not only is the apostle undoubtedly upheld in his whole work by a central message, which can be didactically formulated, but that he also, for the first time in Christian history, developed an approach to a theological hermeneutic Paul developed no fixed exegetical method and no self-contained dogmatic system, but he did have a theme which dominates the whole of his theology: the doctrine of justification. This did not only provide him with a hermeneutical approach; it consistently determined his interpretation of Scripture.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, Stuhlmacher brings a third article hermeneutic to bear on the Romans 4 text ("I believe in the Holy Spirit...the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen"). He calls for the belief in resurrection as the central doctrine of Christian faith, in part because Rom 4:24 is one of the earliest Christian confessions ("[Righteousness] will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead").

What took place in Jesus' death and appearance was interpreted by the Easter witnesses as the realization of the mightiest deed of God spoken of in Israel's

<sup>2</sup>Käsemann, *Perspectives*, 81.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 138, 164.

confession. Yahweh in his saving righteousness raised Jesus, the crucified, from the dead By means of this one statement, which...is a statement of faith and can only be such, the rule of Yahweh and the destiny of Jesus are firmly joined From just this reciprocity there developed the mission and kerygma of Jesus as the Christ of God. The oldest confession of the resurrection is thus also the wellspring for mission preaching and christology.<sup>5</sup>

Käsemann and Stuhlmacher agree on the logic of using the central proclamation of the New Testament as the means to a hermeneutic uniting Old and New Testament. But what shall be the central proclamation: justification of the ungodly or the resurrection of the dead? How is this to be determined?

While Käsemann seeks the center through a full exegesis of the Romans 4 text, Stuhlmacher focuses on what he believes is the kernel of the text. He appeals to the earliest

tradition of the Jerusalem Christians' confession of faith, which he dates around 31 A.D. He asserts thereby that Abraham's role in this text is to demonstrate resurrection (v. 17b, "...the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist"). Secondly, he asserts that, in Abraham, resurrection (i.e., the resurrection of Abraham's and Sarah's pro-creative powers) becomes the hermeneutical link between the Old and New Testaments.

Käsemann will not argue from history, but from Paul's internal logic. The difference between them can be seen in one verse, Rom 4:25: "[Jesus] was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification." Käsemann will argue that "for our justification," i.e., the justification of the ungodly, is the central meaning of this verse, of this text, and of the New Testament. Stuhlmacher will argue for the primacy of belief in the resurrection, attested to in the phrase "was raised to life."

## II. STUHLMACHER'S LOGIC FOR A THIRD ARTICLE HERMENEUTIC

Stuhlmacher begins his case for resurrection as the central doctrine of the New Testament with a form-critical move. He begins by identifying the oldest confession of Jesus' resurrection:

Viewed from the history of its transmission, the kernel of the tradition quoted by Paul in 1 Cor 15:1ff....presupposes the two brief formulae of Luke 24:34 and Rom 4:25 and absorbs them both. Thus the dating of 1 Cor 15:3b-5 yields clues for the time of the origin of these terse formulae....It is most probable that we have here ancient Jerusalemite tradition....In all probability verses 3b-5 give us traditional material from the period before Paul's conversion [i.e., between 30-32 A.D.].<sup>6</sup>

It is important to note that his move presupposes that the closer one gets to the time of Jesus' death and resurrection, the more authentic is the kernel of truth. It also presupposes that the "kernel" of post-resurrection formulaic confession will lead to the central doctrine of the New Testament. That is an assumption that

<sup>5</sup>Stuhlmacher, *Schriftauslegung*, 151 (unpublished translation).

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 140-141, note 26.

places theological weight on the immediacy of an historical event rather than on later theological reflections of the apostle. To be consistent with this principle we would be obliged to prefer Mark to John as a theological work. Rom 4:25 is cited here because it belongs to the historically oldest materials of the New Testament tradition after Easter. This form-critical move removes and elevates part of the text based on its perceived formulaic use in the early church. Stuhlmacher states his fundamental method of inquiry in this way:

In order to push our inquiry ahead, we must, in my opinion, begin with the oldest Christian confession of Jesus' resurrection....The confession that God raised Jesus from the dead still turns out to be foundational and normative for the formation of the early Jerusalem community and for the outreach toward mission, and the event of Jesus' resurrection itself emerges as the decisive basis of Christian faith. This is

an historical statement, first of all, because the confessions of Jesus' resurrection in Luke 24:34, 1 Cor 15:3-5, and Rom 4:25 belong to the historically oldest and, in any event, best datable materials of the New Testament tradition after Easter.<sup>7</sup>

“Jesus' resurrection itself emerges as the decisive basis of Christian faith.” In this statement Stuhlmacher shows his historically and ecclesiological based hermeneutic. He asserts that the foundation and norm for the formation of the early Jerusalem community was the confession that God raised Jesus from the dead:

It is a historical statement, finally, in view of the fact that only the event of Jesus' resurrection and the confession of this act of God wrought in Jesus renders intelligible the development of the primitive Christian history of mission. Only under the impress of the resurrection event did Jesus' followers, shaken and confused by his crucifixion, return to Jerusalem...where they founded the first Christian community and from their confession of Jesus' resurrection began with a mission of the Christ.<sup>8</sup>

This is a clear anthropocentric and sociological perspective of the church's beginning. It is an argument for resurrection as the central doctrine of the New Testament on the basis that it provides the only intelligible reason for the development of the church. Indeed, few will argue that organization of one, and later several, Christian communities would have resulted without the event of Jesus' resurrection and faith in the risen crucified One.

While it is agreed that without the resurrection there would be no community (for the presence of Christ is the life of the church) and that resurrection is the most impressive visible single event, without which the central message could not have proceeded, it is not a necessary conclusion that it was, or became, the center of the gospel. However, it is Stuhlmacher's unique hermeneutic move which makes the historically “observable” sociological reality the basis for and the content of faith.

For this purpose Stuhlmacher closely knits the phrases “was raised—for our justification” (Rom 4:25). They are knit so closely that the second phrase is all but collapsed into the first. The sociological and anthropological become not only the

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 140.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 141.

framework for, but also the content of, the theological. In fact, resurrection, for Stuhlmacher, becomes the content of the gospel.

When we begin with the confession of the resurrection as the theologically decisive basic confession of the Christian faith, we begin at the same time with the historical point of departure for mission and the point around which all New Testament traditions crystallize.<sup>9</sup>

### III. KÄSEMANN'S EXEGETICAL MOVES IN ROMANS 4

Käsemann's hermeneutic is based on two horizons. The first is his exegesis of Paul's main doctrine, not just in this text but in general (though he believes that this text centers the doctrine). His second horizon is his concern for present teaching in the church, particularly in maintaining the tension inherent in the faith of the cross, i.e., believing even when the hour is dark.

Käsemann works through the chapter by section: verses 1-8, 9-12, 13-22, 23-25. In the first section, the indispensable key to Paul's doctrine of justification is formulated specifically in v. 5 ("But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness"). This is the spearhead that makes the rest of the chapter's argument possible. Paul proclaims the justification of the ungodly:

Abraham is ungodly, in so far as he cannot be called 'good,' measured against the standards of the Jewish and Greek worlds. He does not deal in works. For that very reason he is, on the other hand, the prototype of faith....The *centre* of our passage is to be found in Paul's separation between faith and what is generally called goodness.<sup>10</sup>

Verses 9-12 raise the issue of whether faith is confined to the sphere of circumcision. Here Käsemann identifies two hermeneutical moves, which he also wants to claim as his: (1) Paul creates offense. For the Jews it was already unendurable that circumcision should only be mentioned second. Paul goes even further when the circumcision of the heart is made the decisive measure. (2) The next move shows that his purpose is not to exclude the Jews:

The choice of the patriarch as example and prototype would be absurd if we were meant to confine the possibility of experiencing the divine righteousness to the period *post Christum crucifixum*.<sup>11</sup>

Why would Paul appeal to a positive example in the Old Testament to speak about New Testament faith? This move would lose all its positive theological significance if he meant to make faith possible only in the resurrection. On this basis Käsemann argues that fixing the central doctrine after the crucifixion is in fact divisive for the canon, *for it formally limits the understanding of God's action in time*, in the same way that circumcision did!

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 142.

<sup>10</sup>Käsemann, *Perspectives*, 85.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 86; contra Käsemann, cf. Gunter Klein, *Rekonstruktion und Interpretation* (Munich: C. Kaiser, 1969) 145-179.

In Käsemann's expansion of this interpretive position one can hear a critique of Stuhlmacher's position:

What Paul is *not* doing is guarding a perceptible and...unbroken continuity between Abraham and Christ, which could fit into the theological formula of

promise and fulfillment....The Apostle did not detach faith from world history. Nevertheless, it shows a gross misunderstanding when...faith is defined as being fundamentally faith in history and history as being faith's primary foundation. Whereas in the first case the divine Word becomes a promise to curiously isolated individuals, in the second it becomes an interpretation of history which merely satisfies speculation.<sup>12</sup>

So what is the positive theological significance of Paul's application of the Old Testament in Romans 4? It is that justification does not set aside salvation history, but it removes its barriers by tearing down the fence of the law and refusing to leave salvation in a private reserve.

It shows that God deals with the world, not merely with the godly. Israel can only follow Abraham's footsteps through faith....Salvation history is the history of the divine Word, which finds out faith and makes superstition possible; it is, therefore, not marked by a visible earthly continuity but by interruptions and paradoxes.<sup>13</sup>

Käsemann draws three hermeneutical guidelines for Christianity from his exegesis of Romans 4: First, formalized schemes of promise and fulfillment must be avoided. God has a free hand to act out his promise—in the gospel as we know it, or outside it. Second, what we know about the gospel is that it replaces the law, but it cannot replace the promise. The promise preceded the gospel and is now coordinated with and revealed in it, but it is not superseded. Finally, these distinctions are important in order to clarify that history and eschatology do not coincide, but are united merely through the word of the divine self-promise.

To miss the distinction between the gospel of faith and belief in the eschatological resurrection (even when it is verifiable) is to risk collapsing faith in the living word into a doctrine of assent and triumph. The promise is meant to be concealed in the word of faith, not reduced and secured by belief in an event.

The Christian dares to trust the divine promise, contrary to every earthly reality (like Abraham), and to rely on the One who raised the dead. The object of faith is not the man who is delivered or who will be resurrected, but the object of faith is the delivering word of God, i.e., the One who raises the dead, not in the raising itself.

Where it is a question of salvation or disaster the believer does not look to any verifiable, already existing facts—either to facts of world history, or the facts of his own moral and religious existence, or to pious traditions. He stands fast at the point where *creatio ex nihilo* has to take place and man's becoming man has always to begin anew, i.e., at the point where God in his sole efficacy and grace remains the first Word and the last.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Käsemann, *Perspectives*, 87.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 88.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 93.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

##### *The problem of history as the foundation of faith*

Historical faith, such as the disciples' post-Easter claim, is certainly important to Christian faith as a record and witness for those who will receive it. It becomes problematical however, when it is reduced to a doctrine or an object of assent. Biblical faith, by definition, is a living relationship that is grounded in my justification (the ungodly) through Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, this too can be reduced to a doctrine, as Käsemann has described.

If the theme of the justification of the ungodly is susceptible to being reduced to a doctrine rather than a relationship, then the Stuhlmacher proposal cannot fare any better. In fact, it fares much worse, because it begins with a belief in an historical event rather than in a present living relation. Resurrection, of course, makes that relation possible, but it is not the primary nature of the relationship. Resurrection is a proclaimed sign of the relationship, but the relationship itself centers in the constant confession that we are ungodly and are justified by a living Lord.

According to Paul's view, faith is not yet in a position to see directly.

It is bound to preaching's power of revelation....The Lord remains the one who acts towards us in his Word....To talk about the 'object' and 'content' of faith is completely inadequate and highly confusing, because the Lord who acts is here forced into a neutral category and thus into the dimension of what is at our disposal and can be replaced by something else.<sup>15</sup>

Stuhlmacher is correct in saying that the resurrection of the dead and the "death of death" are no longer awaited apart from Jesus. Yet, the fulfillment of the work of reconciliation and the triumph of God's grace, set in motion in Jesus' death and resurrection, are not yet made manifest. To call for a biblical theology grounded in resurrection christology unfortunately collapses christology into eschatology. It removes biblical theology from the theology of the cross.

This removal entails two difficulties for proclamation. First, the Christian life must be lived in discipleship in the shadow of the cross, even if the cross does bear the sign of the resurrection. New Testament faith is centered in God's love for the cosmos, not first in the hope of immortality. Second, resurrection does not necessarily equal salvation, if resurrection is followed by judgment.

##### *Confessing the Apostle's Creed*

As inheritors of a gospel which includes the resurrection, our theological commitments lead us to a third article proclamation of victory in the resurrection of Jesus.<sup>16</sup> Yet it must be clear that this third article claim does not originate in an exegesis of the center of the Romans 4 text. Neither is it the full content of the gospel, nor its primary teaching. Making it primary, in place of the justification of

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 83.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 87.

the ungodly, flirts with truncating the message or collapsing it into fundamental triumphalism.

Third article proclamation, preaching of the resurrection, is important and must remain so. It is important, but it is not primary. Hope in the resurrection cannot precede justification by faith, for there is no established hope without justification. Hope cannot substitute for faith. Praise cannot replace obedience. The gospel cannot be simplified to a witness of immortality. One might ask historically whether it was in fact the effects of the resurrection that we observe in the sociological formation of the church or whether it was indeed the effect of the radical experience of the ungodly who, in the power of the Holy Spirit, believed they were justified.

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