

[This unpublished paper of Gordon H. Clark's is on the theory of history of Oscar Cullman (1902-1999), a European Lutheran theologian. The date of writing is unknown.]

Excursus on Cullman

Paul asserts that he had received, from God or from the apostles before him, the preaching of Christ's death for our sins. Not only is this said here, but it was earlier emphasized in 1:18, 23, and 2:2, 8. This is enough, one would think, to justify calling the death of Christ, and his resurrection, the kernel of the gospel. The term kernel is figurative and therefore ambiguous. At the very least one may say that in Christianity the preaching of the cross is indispensable. It is also elementary – in the sense that is nearly the first thing that must be declared to the heathen. There are other factors that are indispensable, though they may not be the first thing to be said in evangelistic or missionary endeavor. The cross and the resurrection may be called the kernel of the gospel because also they are repeated the most frequently, and are the theme of more hymns than any other subject. All this is so obvious that a minimum of scholarship is needed to discover it, and a maximum of perversity to distort it. Perverse scholarship, however, occurs.

Not the most perverse, and some would say the least, is Oscar Cullman, who, in his Christ and Time – The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History, discusses the kernel of the gospel. His Foreword states, “The object of the present work is to determine what is central to the Christian proclamation” (p. 11). This, he says, is “the one great task of New Testament scholarship, and perhaps of all Christian theology.” Although it would seem that no great scholarship is needed to answer this question, several gentlemen who are recognized as scholars have given divergent answers. To these Cullman replies that “the essential Christian kernel” cannot be determined on the basis of personal preference. The determination must be based on “the ancient writings themselves.”

He then rephrases question for the sake of clarity: “In what does the specifically Christian element of the New Testament consist? That is to say, precisely what is there which it does not have in common with philosophical or religious systems?” (p. 12)

At this point difficulty sets in. Even on a very superficial level, the death and resurrection of Christ (and to prevent further misunderstanding, be it noted that Cullman does not stress these two events as Paul does) are not the only factors that can be described as the “specifically Christian

element” in the New Testament. Or, to use Cullman's other phraseology, they are not the only factors that are “precisely what is there which it does not have in common with philosophical or religious systems.” The doctrine of immediate imputation of Adam's sin, though it does not receive the frequent mention that the crucifixion receives, is equally foreign to other religious systems. On a less superficial level one can argue that the Christian concept of God has nothing in common with any non-Christian system. Not only is the Christ conception Trinitarian, but the complex of omnipotence, love, justice, irresistible grace, sanctification, all of which together with other factors are integral to the Christian concept of God, leaves only a verbal similarity between them as used in Islam or Hinduism and as found in the Bible.¹

However, Cullman believes that while much of Biblical theology is common to other systems, there is one unique element. This single element is the Christian concept of time. As one reads further into Cullman's book, one wonders if this is a single element or whether it is a series of events. Clearly the term time is not used in the usual Aristotelian, Kantian, philosophic, and scientific meaning. Indeed, Cullman nowhere defines time, and the Einsteinian problem of identifying simultaneity is far from his thought. He actually means history, not time. Now, history may consist of many events, but it is convenient to treat it as the single factor that distinguishes Christianity from Hinduism, Greek philosophy, and physical science.

Cullman now lays the foundation for his theory by noting how our modern calendars count the years. About A.D. 500 the Christian west began to date events as so many years after the birth of Christ. As late as A.D. 1700 there arose the wisdom of also dating events as so many years before the Birth of Christ. Our present calendars therefore are not linear from creation, as the Jewish calendar is, but are linear in two directions from a center. This agrees, Cullman says, with “the Primitive Christian conception of time and history.” Now, whether primitive Christian (Peter, Matthew, and Mark?) had any clear concept of time or history may be doubted; but that this general scheme is Christian need not be contested.

The next step is to assert that “the theological affirmation which lies as the basis of the Christian chronology ... asserts ... that from this mid-point all history is to be understood and judged.” (p. 19). From this mid-point an “unlimited series of numbers” starts off in both directions. But let us readers not

1 For a detailed argument see Religion Reason and Revelation, G.H. Clark, Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1961

be carried away in both directions by enthusiasm. It does not seem correct to say that all history shall be judged by an event that took place in the year one. Say indeed that the Father has committed all judgment to the Son; that judgment is pronounced on the basis of divine Law, and that acquittal depends on the imputed righteousness of Christ, but it is loose talk to say that history will be judged by an event in the year one. Further loose talk is found in an “unlimited series of numbers.” This is good arithmetic, but it is false as Christian history. The creation of man occurred a finite number of years before the birth of Christ, and history will end a finite number of years afterward. These rather obvious flaws in the argument, though they could be corrected, or without damage forgotten, warn the reader to be alert at every step.

Granting, however, that the Christian presupposition underlying the construction of our calendar is foreign to the principles of secular historiography, we also grant that equally foreign to secularism is the Biblical restriction of interest to a limited series of events. Abraham and his family are important but Ur of the Chaldees is not. The Exodus is important, but Egyptian history before Jacob and after Moses is useless. Jesus was born during the reign of Augustus, but the Punic Wars are irrelevant. Secular historians, while recognizing certain periods as more important in one way or another, treat all ages and all nations as equal in principle. Cullman very appropriately uses Celsus to express his secular viewpoint: “Jews and Christians appear to me like a host of bats or ants who come out of their hiding places, or like ... worms who hold a meeting and say to one another, 'To us God reveals and proclaims everything. He does not trouble himself with the rest of the world ...’”²

But with this excellent quotation from Celsus in mind, Cullman somehow manages to contradict himself by stating, “Even from this viewpoint [This Christian viewpoint which ignores China and the Incas] there remains wide room for the historian to carry on his particular task of organizing and investigating general history, as he is accustomed to do, in quite other 'secular' connections, and he can do this without coming into conflict with Primitive Christianity's Christocentric view of history.” (p. 20). Of course, this is precisely what the secular historian cannot do. His description or construction of events has no place for a final divine judgment, at least for the kind of divine judgment described in the New Testament. His view of the nature of any event is totally inconsistent with the Christian concept of events. Cullman in fact admits this, for in the very next paragraph he says, “The latter [Christian] view, however, makes the claim ... to render a final judgment even on the facts of general history ...” (p.20) But this judgment is, in part, that the secular historian is wrong.

2 The same argument is found in *God and Evil*, written by C.E.M. Joad before his conversion.

The importance of the contrast between Christian and secular history sharpens as Cullman develops his thesis. The secular historian, he says, will always consider the series of events chosen by the Christian to be a peculiar selection. But what he considers peculiar, arbitrary, and queer, is precisely the essence of Christianity. In fact, asserts Cullman, “all Christian Theology in its innermost essence is Biblical history. ... [Christ] has become history in all his fullness. ... The historical work of Jesus of Nazareth is regarded as the full [ital. His] expression of the divine revelatory action ...” (pp. 23, 24)

This is not the modern secular view; but it is not the Biblical view either. The reason is that for all his insistence on divine revelation, his idea of revelation differs from that of the Bible. There is of course a sense in which events like the Exodus, or even an auto accident, reveal God. Yet while Christianity would be a false religion if the events of Israel's history were not historical, these events by themselves would reveal no more about God than an auto accident.

The central issue here is revelation. Cullman is so suspicious of anything “speculative, philosophical, metaphysical” that he writes “Everything that the first Christians proclaim in their writings is revelation of God's action in Christ.” (p. 26) Yet between these two questions he refers to “the earliest two-part confession” where “it is said, one (ital his) God the Father, from whom are all things ...” Now, orthodox Christianity does not deny that Christ was the agent in creation; but the proclamation of “One God” is not a “revelation of God's action in Christ.” It is a theological, theocentric, not Christocentric, confession, which can even be called philosophical and metaphysical. This confession is a revelation; it is not an historical event.

Since it is theological and, even without explicit mention of the Holy Spirit, essentially Trinitarian, it is strange that on these very pages Cullman declares “With every other division [of creeds into sections] even the trinitarian, one runs to risk of introducing into the New Testament, a later speculative formulation of questions which is foreign to Primitive Christianity; one runs the risk of obliterating or at least of weakening Primitive Christianity through orientation to revelatory and redemptive history ... under the influence of Greek speculative thought, [the Trinitarian debates] permit Primitive Christianity's central conception of time and history to fall into the background.”

No, first of all, the doctrine of the Trinity is nowhere to be found in Greek philosophy. Nor is Greek Philosophy anywhere to be found in Athanasius. His De Decretis contains only two minor and

derogatory references to the philosophical schools. In the second place, the Nicene Creed definitely, even prominently asserts historical events: “who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried; and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures ...”

This can hardly be described as permitting Primitive Christianity's emphasis on history to fall into the background. Cullman apparently thinks that any addition to the bare, uninterpreted events obscures or denies them. He does not seem to see that event plus explanation does not equal no event.

Now, some of his argumentation is very fine as a reply to Bultmann and other Neo-orthodox or dialectical theologians. Nothing could be more true or more applicable than his remark that no one can reject all history and still preserve Christian faith. Renan and many nineteenth century critics claimed to preserve Christianity by discarding history and erecting an ethical religion based on – only some statement in – the Sermon on the Mount. Albert Schweitzer, even though he put an end to ethical modernism by showing – what every other orthodox Christian has always known – that eschatology cannot be eradicated from primitive Christianity, discarded the history, dismissed Jesus as insane, and built a religion on the principle of reverence for life. Bultmann too discards the historical events as merely a literary, culturally-conditioned first century framework and “preserves” the disciples' remarkable anticipations of French existentialism. Against the total eradication of history, Cullman's judgment is just.

But there are two points which vitiate Cullman's construction. The first has already been stated. To defend history by denying the Biblical explanation of the events destroys Christian faith as much as existentialism does. The explanation includes the doctrine of the Trinity, the eternal decree, and a complex of doctrines which, though not themselves historical, underly the events. Were the arbitrary, ingenious, and subjective explanations of every theologian and critic brought into court on an equal footing, the result would be that no meaning could authoritatively be assigned to any event, and that non-authoritatively every meaning could be assigned.

But orthodox Christianity has always asserted the Biblical explanations of these events. Revelation is not confined to the events as such; they reveal almost nothing. Revelation must include, in a very real sense revelation must be a verbal communication of truth. But this is what Cullman will

not accept. “We do not intend to support a rigid Biblicism; for it is characters of such false Biblicistic attitude that treats all (ital. His) of equal worth. ...” The last half of this sentence is nothing less than pejorative propaganda. Biblicism, if we call it that, acknowledges that the genealogies in I Chronicles are less important than the contents of Rom 5:12-21. But they are truth and equally true Cullman's insistence on history is a denial that the Bible is revelation. For him it is at best a record of revelation, a record, however, that consists of the fallible interpretations of events by well meaning but uncritical writers. Perhaps the Bible is not even a witness of revelation; but only a witness to the faith of some people that they had received a revelation (p. 31).

This view of revelation, Cullman's restriction of revelation to actions or events, is the record and final point that vitiates his construction. For, if revelation consists entirely of events, there is no way to determine what the events were. Cullman's defense of history evaporates history.

At the beginning of this discussion of Cullman it was noted that Paul delivered what he had received, that Christ died, was buried, and rose again on the Third day. Surely, if anything, this is the “kernel” of the gospel. But can Cullman certify this kernel. Indeed he cannot. Once he rejects the Bible, the truth of the Bible, he cannot accept these events as the kernel by anything other than personal preference. They are not the kernel because the Bible says so. Suppose someone prefers to accept the genealogies as the kernel?

It is therefore instructive to note that although Cullman does indeed upon occasion refer to “the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ,” he rather prefers vague phrases such as the “Christ-event” (p.44) or the “Christ-deed” (pp. 53, 54). But if anyone wishes to insist on his several references to the death of Jesus, the question recurs, of what significance is this death? The bare event is meaningless?

The Apostle Paul, with his emphasis on the historicity of the death and resurrection, says more than Cullman. He says four words more (in Greek three), viz., “according to the Scriptures.” “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, he was buried, he was raised on the third day, according to the Scriptures.” In this extremely short statement Paul mentions the Scriptures twice. Cullman discards the Scriptural explanation, and with it loses sin, crucifixion, resurrection, and history as well.