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## Faith Without a Focus

### Is Also Dead

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After the fanciful reconstructions of the life of Jesus by Strauss, Renan, and other nineteenth-century writers, Martin Kähler proposed a new theory of history and faith. This theory has been adopted in the main by Barth, Bultmann, and many contemporaries, and therefore demands attention.

The motivation of this new theory of history was the preservation of the Christian faith despite the inescapable conclusion that the Bible was untrustworthy. Kähler first showed that reconstructing a Life of Jesus is impossible because the Synoptics recount neither his boyhood nor more than a fraction of his ministry. Conceded. But Kähler went further and also denied that the gospel accounts or any part of them could furnish, as one writer has put it, even “a minimum of historically certified facts . . . to support Christian faith, to give it authority, and to provide faith with its invulnerable basis and content” (Carl E. Braaten, *The Historical Jesus and the Kerygmatic Christ*).

Kähler’s defense of this radical exclusion of history from faith is that historical verification of any account of Jesus automatically substitutes positivistic historicism for dogmatics.

Although Kähler, Barth, Bultmann, and all other members of this school of theology place great emphasis on the notion of “scientific” history, we cannot here go into the immense subject of historiography. Let it be noted, however, that their argument is fallacious because it assumes that positivistic historicism is the only acceptable form of historiography. No note is taken of those professional historiographers, such as Croce and Collingwood, who defend the autonomy of history against its positivistic reduction to natural science. This is not to say that R. G. Collingwood has satisfactorily solved the problem of New Testament faith; but so long as there are several theories of historical methodology, it is fallacious to argue that historical verification must be positivistic historicism.

Under the compulsion to avoid positivism these theologians have constructed a type of faith that not only does not need historical support but is actually damaged by

historical support. Note how Hans Conzelmann is disturbed when the results of archeology lead the common people to conclude that “the Bible is right after all.” He does not want people to have this kind of corroboration. The motive alleged in this theological line is that faith cannot, simply cannot, depend on the fluctuating and problematic results of historical research. As Braaten again says, “neither the basis nor the content of faith can be secured” in this manner.

These theologians claim that the doctrine of justification by faith requires this rejection of history. We are justified by faith alone completely apart from the works of exacting historical investigation. Not only historical investigation: the same argument implies that faith cannot depend on the scholarly works of dogmatics, which we must prevent history from replacing. Otherwise the learned historian or theologian would be in a better spiritual position than a simple Christian. Reliance on any such works would make the authority of the Gospel contingent upon the authority of scholarship. Faith, says Kähler, has no extrinsic authority – neither a verbally inspired Bible, the Church and its creeds, subjective experience, nor scientific history.

This point of view, so widespread today, can be shown, I believe, to be based on a confusion, a confusion that is basically a misunderstanding of faith. Under the spell of Kierkegaard and later existentialism, the dialectical theologians reduce faith to the purely subjective operations of the mind and neglect the objective content. What our contemporaries talk about is essentially different from the *sola fide* of Luther, Calvin, and, may I add, Turretin. The Reformers knew what they believed. The modern faith has neither “what” nor knowledge.

These new theologians’ appeal to justification by faith alone is thus seen to be irrelevant. Justification is a judicial pronouncement by God. Of course, scholarly activity is neither the cause, the basis, the content, nor the authority for this judicial sentence. But this divine action has nothing to do with the matter at hand. To talk about justification is to wander from the subject. The subject is not justification but the nature of faith. “Justification by X” demands an explanation of the “X.” Does “X” depend on history? If it does, this “X” is still the means of justification.

Now, despite the assertions of mysticism and existentialism, faith cannot be an empty belief in a vacuous nothing. So-called encounter is simply faith. It is not Islamic faith, it is not Christian faith, it is not any kind of faith. It is simply an uninterpreted experience, like a pain or other uncognitive emotion. Mere encounter is not a belief at all.

Undoubtedly Christianity requires a subjective, psychological act of believing; but *the faith* is what is believed. Unless a person believes something, he does not believe. He has no faith. The fundamental difficulty with much modern preaching is that it allows faith no object or content.

Bultmann asserts, “Faith does not at all arise from the acceptance of historical facts.” Taken at face value this would mean that the passive and active obedience of

Jesus Christ is of no importance. It is not necessary to know even that Jesus died. Jesus' death itself is a historical fact, or at least an alleged fact.

Yet even Bultmann seems to allow that the historical fact of Jesus' death plays some role in Christianity. But if so, the principle of excluding history is breached, in this one particular. And in many others with it. For if Jesus died, he must have lived. Can one learn that a man lived without some kind of historical evidence? Furthermore, since Pilate and the Pharisees died, too, the death of Jesus, if it is to be of any importance, must in some way have been different from theirs. Where can one discover this difference? One can learn something of this difference from what Jesus himself said about his death. An orthodox Christian may indeed rely on what Paul said; but since Bultmann reduces New Testament theology to the ungrounded imaginations of the early Christians, he, far more than the orthodox, must discover the actual words of the Jesus of history – unless he is willing to put his faith in Pilate or a Pharisee. Historical research is therefore indispensable to the Christian faith.

Does this mean that the learned historian is in a better position than the simple Christian? Well, it certainly does, if we add the phrase, "other things being equal." Naturally, learned historians may not be Christians at all. But other things being equal, the more one knows about Christ, the better off he is. Christ's final command was to teach all things whatsoever I have commanded you. He did not put ignorance and knowledge on a par. He never commended little faith in comparison with extensive faith.

When the dialectical theologians decry historical material as furnishing a basis for faith, or as giving faith its authority, or as providing faith with a support, they confuse the issue; at least they confuse the issue if their phrases denote something different from the content of faith. Faith, as said above, must give content; and Christian faith has as part of its content the words and deeds of Jesus. These words and deeds, including his death, are learned and believed only through historical reports, that is, the Gospels. Christianity, unlike Buddhism, is a religion to which actual historical events are essential. Dispose of the history and one disposes of Christianity with it. Kähler therefore has invented a pseudo-problem and solves it by eliminating faith.

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***Watching snow***

*Just like this manna fell*

*Not in loaves but broken broken*

*Honey-sweet into a wildness*

*Slowly slowly from some flour-cloud*

*Take and eat it is my body*

*For the faithful early early*

*Kneeling for that first communion*

*LOUIS HOADLEY DICK*

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