

**A Confessional Hermeneutic:
Alternative to the Historical-Critical Method
Gordon J. Spykman**

introduction

At the Reformed Ecumenical Synod Australia 1972 a full day conference was devoted to a discussion of Biblical authority. In its "Summary Statement" the synod concluded that "there are still a number of questions related to the hermeneutical problem that were left unsettled, and that need further study by the member churches. The most important ones noted are these:

- a) How to escape the dualism of faith and science through a correct view of Scripture.
- b) Whether the historical-critical method should be employed in our dealing with Scripture, and to what extent..." (Scripture and its Authority, *International Reformed Bulletin*, Summer, 1973, p. 63).

In the lecture I gave at that conference, entitled "Scripture, Faith and Science," I explored some problems involved in using the historical-critical method in Reformed theology, citing Prof. K. Runia inaugural address, "Predikirig en Historisch-Kritisch Onderzoek." It noted that "we almost always find ourselves trying to say both 'yes' and 'no' to the historical-critical method at the same time," and then posed the question: "Is there a way out of this ambiguous position toward a more consistently, Reformed method of Biblical hermeneutics? I then proposed that "Reformed scholarship place this matter on its agenda as a matter of high priority. To accept this challenge would call for a hermeneutic which does full justice to Scripture both as history of redemption and as history of redemption (*Ibid.*, p 31), At that time I felt I could do no more than underscore this problem as a matter of "unfinished business."

In his response Dr. H.M. Beets was therefore justified in saying, "I was deeply disappointed when Prof. Spykman failed to show us the way out of this ambiguous position. What solution did Prof. Spykman offer? No solution, Prof. Spykman, do you have a solution to offer?" (*Ibid.*, pp. 34, 35).

That question has been haunting me for over a year. In this paper I now ask your kind indulgence as I try my hand at working out an answer.

[p.2>]

the central issue

The issue at hand is basically a question of faith and science, of the inter-relatedness of confession and theology. It is a question of how to go about doing confessional theology. How shall we proceed as we try to do justice to our Reformed confession concerning Biblical authority in our Biblical theology, in our hermeneutics, in our scientific study of Scripture?

If we as theologians maintain our confession that the Bible is indeed the Word of God, but then adopt hermeneutical methods which allow the Bible to function in our theology only as an human-historical document, it is then no longer clear that in practice our theological methods do in fact honor this confession.

This statement of the problem underscores the very heart of the matter: How shall we go about developing a theological method which can stand the test of our Reformed confession concerning the nature of Biblical authority?

The pivotal point of theological discussion nowadays is hermeneutics. Which principles and methods of Biblical interpretation shall we follow in opening up the meaning of the Scriptures?

In the past couple of decades many theologians under the influence of Rudolph Bultmann, employ a *kerygmatic* method—emphasizing the *kerygma* of Scriptures shorn of its so-called *myths* and cut loose from *history*. Other theologians, under Neo-Marxist influences, are developing a *political* method—a political hermeneutic, and on the basis of that a political gospel and a political theology.

Looking back over the past century, however, hermeneutics has been dominated by the historical-critical method. This method is usually associated with the classic Liberalism of the 19th and 20th centuries. There are many variations on this basic method. But at bottom the historical-critical method affirms a secular-humanist view of reality governed by natural law, in which truth is discoverable by the scientific method and historical possibility circumscribed by the law of analogy. Accordingly Scripture was taken to be the record of Israel's religious experiences and the reflections of the early church on Jesus. Liberal theology then proceeded on the assumption that the historical-critical method was able to uncover the actual historical facts of the Biblical narratives, what really happened, and thus to rediscover the original historical Jesus of Nazareth.

The principles, presuppositions and perspectives which shaped this approach to Scripture stand in sharp contrast to the Reformed view of Scripture. Little wonder that in the past Reformed theologians almost without exception denounced the historical-critical method as wholly incompatible with the Reformed faith and a Reformed confessional theology.

In recent years, however, there have been some significant changes in outlook. There are theologians within the Reformed tradition who evidence a greater openness to some versions of the historical-critical method. They do not advocate a consistent and thorough-going application of this method, as in Liberal theology. They wish to use it in a limited way. The argument runs something like this: Since Scripture is an historical-redemptive revelation it is open to historical investigation; but then not at the expense of its redemptive message, as in Liberalism. [p.3>]

Thus we have arrived at a point where in the same breath we are trying to say both 'yes' and 'no' to this method. We insist on saying 'no' to this method in terms of its 'anti-transcendent' principles, presupposition and perspectives. Yet at the same time we are trying to find a way of saying 'yes' to it in terms of its tools and techniques—as though methodologies are more or less 'neutral.' This is the dialectical, paradoxical situation we face in reflecting upon some contemporary Reformed theologies.

Now my question is this: Is it not possible to gain greater clarity of vision and greater theological consensus in this matter? Why in our hermeneutics should we allow a Liberal tradition to write our agenda for us while we rest content with simply reacting to a 'foreign' method by writing in a few amendments a few marginal corrections, a few critical footnotes? It seems to me that it is high time that we consider developing a hermeneutic method which arises more directly and distinctively from the very genius of our Reformed faith, our Reformed confessions and our Reformed theological heritage.

This, it seems to me, calls for a Reformed *confessional* theology, more specifically, a Reformed *confessional* hermeneutic. To this assignment I shall return later in this paper.

an underlying dialectic

My concern here is the dialectical tension often manifest between faith and science, between confession and theology. There are those who appear, on the one hand, to maintain the confession that Scripture is indeed the Word of God, while, on the other hand, employing a hermeneutical method which fails to do justice to that confession. How does this dialectic come to expression? Some thing like this: There are those who seem to be saying that as a Christian *man* I accept Scripture by faith as the Word of God, but as a theologian, as a *scientist* studying the Bible historically, I may not allow this faith-commitment to play a decisive role In my scientific work. In the hermeneutic enterprise my confessional stance must be held in abeyance. As a man of science I must suspend judgment on Scripture as Word of God, as transcendental norm, as divine revelation, in order to give the historical method free play. In the end one can then return to a whole-hearted biblical faith and recover the redemptive message of Scripture only by a leap of faith.

This approach calls into question the very possibility of an authentically confessional theology. It results in a dualistic view of life as a whole and of science in particular. In the end one is left with a dialectic tension between faith arid scholarship, which sets confession and theology at odds with each other.

I do not mean to suggest that faith and theology should be identified. That is no remedy. Bavinck made the point very clearly, on his deathbed, in these words attributed to him: “My dogmatics doesn’t help me now; my salvation is by faith alone.” Faith and works, confession and theology may not be confused. Yet theology is one way in which we by faith seek to work out our salvation in fear and trembling in obedience to the Word of God. But to identify faith and theology means that ever theological problem becomes a faith crisis.

[p.4>]

We must therefore *distinguish* faith and theology. But we may not divorce them. It is precisely at this point that the basic problem arises in using the historical-critical method—the fundamental dialectic between confession and hermeneutics, which arises out of a dualistic understanding of the relation of faith and theology as a science.

an historical overview

This problematic is not new to our generation. It has haunted Christian thinkers for nearly 2000 years.

Many early church fathers were deeply influenced by the Greek dualism of mind and matter, spiritual exercises like theologizing arid philosophizing, on the one hand; and physical mundane activities, on the other. This dualistic world-and-life-view was then inherited by most medieval Christians in a more biblically tempered form. Thomas Aquinas gave the most decisive expression to this Christianized dualism in his grand synthesis of faith arid reason. This in part is what Barth had in mind in speaking of that demonic little “and” in Christian theology: faith *and* reason, nature *and* grace, Christ *and* culture, church *and* world, the natural *and* the supernatural, philosophy *and* theology, natural theology *and* theology of the Word. Since faith is supernatural,

and since theology deals with matters of faith, theology was extolled as ‘the queen of the sciences.’ Just ask Galileo!

The reformers of the 16th century introduced some radical breaks with these long-standing dualisms. Especially among some Calvinists there was a growing appreciation for the *wholeness* of man, the *religious unity* of human life, and the oneness of God’s work of creation. In keeping with this more unified perspective we meet in many reformational scholars a deepening insight into the inter-relatedness of faith and science, confession and theology.

Despite these initial break-throughs, generally the follow-through fell short of its goal. Recall the ‘two kingdom doctrine of Luther, accentuated by later Lutherans, with its lasting impact upon church and state relations, and also upon science, including theology, right up to our times. In Calvin too the old dualistic tendencies were not wholly overcome. In his doctrine of man he still speaks of the body as the ‘prison-house’ of the soul and he perpetuates the old distinction between ‘natural gifts’ corrupted by sin and ‘supernatural gifts’ utterly lost. Fortunately, in other places in Calvin a unified perspective comes through more clearly. In subsequent Protestant Scholasticism, however, there was a strong reversion to the old dualisms.

It is remarkable, I think, that whenever things go wrong in Christian theology, most often this is traceable to a more or less deep-seated dualism in our outlook on life as a whole, and this shows up in science too. Such dualisms almost always involve cutting a line somewhere through creation, dividing between some part of life which is an exercise of Christian faith and another part which is not (or not so much) an exercise of Christian faith.

In modern philosophy and theology too similar dualisms reappear as the underlying religious motif in western Christianity. Kant in the 17th century concentrated [p.5>] his mental powers on designing a grand synthesis of science and religious. To rescue religion from the merciless attacks of empirical philosophy and at the same time to create for it a reasonable place in human life, Kant formulated his famous line of demarcation between ‘pure reason’ (science) and ‘practical reason’ (morality), but all ‘within the bounds of reason alone.’ What Thomas was to the medieval era, that Kant was to the modern period. His monumental attempt to offer a dualistic synthesis of science and religion laid the groundwork for the basic problematic which has dominated the modern mind, Schliermacher???? the father of modern Liberal theology, translated much of Kant’s philosophy into theology, seeking again to salvage a place for religion in life by defining it as ‘Feeling’ in contrast to reason as the arena of the sciences.

The work of Kant and Schleiermacher, the ‘grandfather’ and ‘father’ respectively of mainline modern theology, has cast its very complex shadow across most of Christian theology down into the 20th century. This is evident in the dominance of Liberal theology with its deep cleavage between ‘faith’ and ‘facts,’ the ‘sacred’ and the ‘secular.’ The large public sectors of life—work, politics, school, communications media, and also science—were viewed as the secular realm. Yet Liberalism generally was not consistently secular. It was only a ‘half-way house’ to the Secular Gospel. Accordingly it also tried to preserve a place in life for the sacred, even lending it a certain aura of respectability. But the sacred is a strictly personal and private affair, limited to inner subjective experiences, and confined to the inner chamber, the family circle and the sanctuary. Faith is a personal matter, but theology as a science must

pass the test of reason, the scientific method, the laws of verifiability. Shades of dualism again—with faith viewed as ‘vertical’ and reason as ‘horizontal.’

Of late the Social Gospel, the voice of classic Liberalism, has been updated in the more contemporary Secular Gospel. Leaving behind part faith/part reason perspective of Liberalism, the spokesmen of the Secular Gospel proceeded to dismantle the second floor of the Liberal ‘half-way house’ by eliminating whatever remnants of the ‘vertical’ were left in Liberalism and absolutizing the ‘horizontal.’ Be done with faith in a God ‘up there’ or a God ‘out there.’ The only God left for ‘man come of age’ is the God ‘in here.’ To their credit it must be said that the Secular Gospelers in their own brazen way are more honest and consistent than the old Liberals. They reduce all of life to a secular search for meaning. Hence, a secular faith and a secular theology too.

Fundamentalism arose in reaction to Liberalism. Fundamentalists tried valiantly to stem the tide of secular humanism by defending the ‘fundamentals’ of the Christian faith. Actually, however, they were only fighting fire with more fire. For in combating Liberal theology, Fundamentalist theologians accepted uncritically the same sacred/secular, faith/reason, grace/nature problematic as their opponents.

Indeed there were significant differences. In Liberalism we find nature devouring grace, while in Fundamentalism grace rendered nature dubious. Yet both found themselves sitting on the horns of the same old dilemma. Therefore neither Liberalism nor Fundamentalism was able even to entertain seriously the possibility of an integrally unified view of life or of the Gospel or of a confessional theology.

[p.6>]

Liberalism historicizes, naturalizes, rationalizes the Scripture. Fundamentalism spiritualizes, staticizes, eternalizes, supernaturalizes the Scriptures. Liberalism reduces hermeneutics to historical-rational inquiry —plus moral applications. Fundamentalism reduces hermeneutics to spiritual intuitions and timeless doctrines—plus moral applications.

A structural analysis of Neo-Orthodox theology, especially the theologies of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, lays bare a similar dialectical problematic, only more dynamic under the influence of existential thought. Think, for example, of the paradoxical antithesis between ‘History’ and ‘Super-History.’ Or, in more familiar concepts, think of the dialectical tension between, on the one hand, ‘general revelation’ and ‘natural theology’ (both of which were denied by Barth), and, on the other hand, ‘special revelation’ and ‘theology of the Word of God.’ Neo-Orthodoxy broke with Liberalism because of its insistence upon locating the center of the Christian religion *below* the grace/nature, God/man, revelation/reason line—with all the immanentistic implications of that position. Though Neo-Orthodoxy is a far cry from Fundamentalism, there are some formal similarities in the way both stress the ‘Supernatural’ and ‘Supra-Historical.’ But the point is this, that structurally both Barth and Brunner pursue their theology within the framework of a sharply drawn dialectic between ‘History’ and ‘Supra-History.’ In Barth the line between them appears as a very heavy one; in Brunner as a rather thin line. Disputes which broke out along this line led to their parting of the ways.

This dualism reappears in Bultmann in his dialectical view of history and myth. Agreeing with Liberalism, Bultmann repudiates the so-called myths in Scripture as vestiges of a pre-scientific mind in the early church. But contrary to Liberalism, he

also repudiates the historical method as the appropriate way to rediscover the Biblical message. Setting himself against both *myth* and *history* Bultmann builds his theology on the Biblical kerygma—a *kerygma* cut loose from *history* and with the myths filtered out. Thus Bultmann’s theology appears to fall into a three-storey structure.

dualist tendencies in Reformed theology

Reformed theology has not always escaped these persistent dualisms. I think, for example, of the way in which we often think, speak and write about such issues as general and special revelation, common and special grace, the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, the covenant of grace in the inner and the outer sense, law and gospel, man as image of God in the broader and the narrower sense, natural and supernatural things, body and soul. We should thankfully acknowledge that generally these distinctions have not served to drive a wedge between faith and theology. But within our theology we have often slipped into dualist patterns of thought.

Recently, however, some new forms of the old dualism are beginning to make inroads into Reformed theology. This is most true in our hermeneutics, and especially in reopening the case for using the historical-critical method. Sometimes this is accompanied by the call for an ‘open confession’ and a ‘free theology.’ The arguments advanced often involve a dualistic-dialectic understanding of Biblical confession and hermeneutic method. So once again an integrally unified view of faith and science is at stake. [p.7>]

These developments compel us to reflect anew on the very nature of divine revelation, more specifically on the nature of *general revelation* and *special revelation* and on the relationship between them. The words themselves are not of ultimate importance. Personally I find the terms ‘general’ and ‘special’ rather non-descript. The basic idea, the central thrust of these concepts is not open to serious debate. Both Scripture and the confessions speak clearly of this two-fold revelation. Some Reformed theologians, however, prefer speaking instead of creation as God’s ‘fundamental revelation’ and Scripture as God’s ‘redemptive revelation,’ which strike me as being more meaningful concepts. Whatever the terminology, our concern should be to do justice to both modes of revelation without structuring them in a dualistic way. How can we in our theology honor both the integral *unity* and the rich *diversity* within the full sweep of God’s revelation? How can we open up meaningfully the essential oneness of all revelation, while at the same time reckoning seriously with the fact that God revealed himself first in creation, then—after our fall into sin—in Scripture, and finally in Jesus Christ?

the hermeneutic key

In seeking to gain insight into these issues, our hermeneutic norm is Scripture alone. Turning then to Scripture, do we find there a hermeneutic key which can help us bring both the unity and diversity of revelation into clearer focus? I think so. Scripture does not let us down. It is very instructive to note carefully the way Scripture itself speaks about revelation as the *Word of God*.

Note, first the many passages in which Scripture speaks about God’s Word as it holds for all creation. We read in Genesis 1 that “God spoke” and it happened. Psalm 33 tells us that “by the Word of the Lord were the heavens made...” Listen to Psalm 147: “He sends forth his command to the earth, his Word runs very swiftly... He sends forth his Word and melts the snow.” All creatures are God’s servants. They wait upon his Word. Their very life consists in this, that they answer to the authoritative Word of

the Lord. A very striking passage is II Peter 3:5-7: The heavens existed long ago by the Word of God; by that same Word they are constantly upheld and are being kept in store for the day of judgment.

Secondly, Scripture again and again claims for itself the confession that in its message we are confronted by the very Word of God in written form. “It is written” is equivalent to “God says.” The words of the prophets and apostles in their central witness to Jesus Christ are the basis for both preaching and Christian theology. The Bible is the Word of God inscripturated.

Thirdly, Scripture testifies centrally and comprehensively to Jesus Christ as the Word of God incarnate. Recall John 1: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” and Hebrews 1: “in these latter days God has spoken to us by his Son.” A very telling passage is Revelation 19:13, where John sees the triumphant Christ riding a white horse and bearing this name, “The Word of God.”

In thus listening obediently to Scripture we are given a hermeneutic key which helps us in opening up the meaning of God’s revelation in its *unity* and *diversity*. God’s Word is basically one Word. Yet this one Word comes to us in the rich diversity of *many* Words. There is, for example in Psalm 19, the silent language [p.8>] of God’s Word as it holds for creation. There is the Word of God in the Scriptures. And there is the Word of God which took on flesh and blood in the birth, death and resurrection of our Lord.

In and through all these various forms of the Word of God there is basically one message, one ever-faithful revelation: I am your God, love Me with all your heart, walk in my ways. God published that Word first in creation. After sin, that Word was republished redemptively in Scripture. In the fulness of the times that Word was personified in Jesus Christ. There is one Word of God running through all the Words of God to men.

With these hermeneutic insights we can begin to understand Paul’s fantastic claim: “In Christ all things hold together” (Colossians 1: 15-20). Then we can proceed to turn the hermeneutic key by which to unlock the meaning of God’s Christo-centric revelation in all its unity and diversity. In and through Christ all things were created and are now being redeemed. In God’s Word for creation Christ is central. In Scripture too Christ is central (John 5:39, Luke 24:27, Acts 8:35). His person and work is the central and unifying principle in the many Words by which God addresses us.

Pre-understanding of Scripture

Every theologian who engages in the interpretation of Scripture in a self-conscious way works within the framework of a certain hermeneutic. He brings a certain pre-understanding of Scripture to bear upon his theological reflections (e.g. Bultmann). He operates with certain hermeneutic principles and methods.

We sometimes hear people defend as ideal the notion that in coming to the Scriptures we must first empty ourselves of all pre-understandings of Scripture and thus allow Scripture to impress itself upon our open and empty minds. This is an impossible ideal. Nor should we strive after it. We cannot escape ourselves. It is always *we* who are involved in Biblical interpretation. In searching the Scriptures we always wear some kind of glasses—for example, moralistic glasses, dogmatic glasses, allegorical glasses, historical-critical glasses, historical-redemptive glasses. The crucial question is whether the glasses we wear have been borrowed from the Scriptures themselves,

whether they are true to Scripture, whether they have been grounded and polished by Scripture itself, whether they can stand the test of Scripture.

But I hear someone say: Then we are caught in hermeneutic circle! This is true. It is inescapable. Acknowledgement of being caught in a hermeneutic circle is a profound recognition of our creaturely dependence on our Maker, of our very existence as image of God, of our complete subservience to the over-arching authority of God's Word. The question is not whether or not we wish to be taken up in a hermeneutic circle. Rather the only question is this: In which hermeneutic circle shall we work? A biblical one or some other?

Calvin recognized the importance of right hermeneutic pre-understanding of Scripture. In his introduction to the *Institutes* he says that this 'little book' was meant to serve as a door-opener, a handbook, an aid to help us in our study of the Bible. The *Institutes* were not intended as a substitute for Scripture, but as spectacles to clarify its meaning, as a pre-understanding guide to lead us to a believing and obedient response to God's Word.

a confessional hermeneutic

Against the background of the preceding discussion, I now submit for your reflection and reaction—as an alternative to the historical-critical method—a hermeneutic which I take to be more true to Scripture and more in harmony with our Reformed confessions. I am calling it a *confessional hermeneutic*.

My starting-point is the 'heart,' out of which, says Scripture, are all the issues of life, including theology. Theology too is an activity of the heart, and thus of the whole man. The Christian theologian must accordingly see his scholarship as rooted in a heart which seeks to lead every thought captive in obedience unto the Word of God in Jesus Christ. For He is the central and comprehensive meaning of God's Word for creation and of God's Word inscripturated. But how shall we work out this Christo-centric heart commitment in a Christo-centric theology?

Scripture is our noetic doorway. There we must find our hermeneutic key. Turning then to Scripture we learn that Scripture is not God's first Word to man. God also speaks in creation. Scripture is not a mere *repetition* of God's creational revelation. Nor does Scripture *replace* God's original revelation in creation. It is not a completely new Word of God. What we have in Scripture is as it were, a 'second revised edition' of God's Word. It is a *republication* of God's Word. In Scripture God's Word comes to us in *lingual* form ('more fully and clearly,' Article II of the Belgic Confession). We must therefore take the very text of Scripture seriously. Moreover, in Scripture God's Word comes to us in the language of *redemption*, to renew our hearts, to open our eyes to see and our ears to hear what God has been saying to us from the very beginning. Therefore the importance of a right understanding of God's Word within the inter-related context of creation and redemption can hardly be over-estimated.

Viewed in this light, Scripture is the divine-human witness to the mighty acts of God in the history of redemption. It speaks with full divine authority. It speaks to all of life. But *how* does it speak to life as a whole? What is the nature of its authority? We usually agree quickly that Scripture is not a handbook on science or politics or art or economics. Yet it does address God's Word authoritatively and redemptively to all of these life activities, in fact, to the full range of our life relationships. But how? In what way? Does Scripture have a particular 'focus'? A special 'scopus'? If so, what is

that peculiar focus'? And how shall we honor that 'focus' in our theology in our hermeneutics?

In seeking to offer an answer to these questions my major thesis is this: Scripture speaks with a 'confessional focus.' Indeed, it speaks to politics but it does not speak politically. It speaks to economics, but it does not speak in economic categories. It speaks to education, but it does not speak in educational concepts. It speaks to science, but it does not speak scientifically. It speak to all these spheres in life, and all the rest too, but in its own unique way, with its own unique 'focus.' That 'focus' I am defining as a 'confessional focus.'

It should be noted, in passing, that in contemporary theology the idea 'confessional' is open to misunderstanding. Therefore a comment or two may be in order for purposes of clarification. This 'confessional focus' should not be [p.10>] confused with the confessions of the church. These confessions are restatements of the 'confessional' message of Scripture. Nor should this 'confessional focus' be taken, as often happens nowadays, in a human and subjective sense, confusing man's confessional response with the Word of God itself. The Bible does at times, as in the Psalms, take the believers confessional responses and make them God's Word to us. (Note in this connection Prof. J.A. Heyn's discussion of the "dialogic structure" of Scripture in "Bible, Church and Proclamation," *International Reformed Bulletin*, Summer, 1973, pp. 36-55.) My highlighting of the 'confessional focus' of Scripture should not, however, be construed as a playing-down of Scripture as Word of God. For it is precisely *God's Word* which comes to us with this 'confessional focus.'

This view of Scripture brings with it the recognition that every event in our life experience can be looked at from various points of view. Historical events are whole events. Yet there are various aspects to every historical event. This is true of biblical history too. In the mighty acts of redemption which constitute the very heart of biblical revelation there are clues pointing in this direction. One could for example, analyze the *political* aspect of David's rule or the *economic* aspect of Solomon's rule. Scripture offers some rather extensive insights into such things. But they are incidental to its real message. They do not open up the central 'focus' of Scripture.

Again, one could reflect on the apostle Peter from the point of view of his *psychological make-up*. Or one could study Paul's mission to Jews, Greeks and Romans in terms of a *linguistic* analysis: What language did he use in proclaiming the Gospel? Something interesting and instructive could be said about these aspects of Biblical history from what we know about the Bible and Bible times. But the central 'focus' of the Biblical message is not political, economic, psychological or linguistic. From what point-of-view then is the history of redemption told? Which aspect stands out? From what perspective does the Bible speak? My answer is this: from the 'confessional' point-of-view. It speaks on all these things with a 'confessional focus.'

These other aspects of historical reality are there. Otherwise the events in the history of redemption would not be real and whole events. They play their important roles. Now this aspect, then that one comes to the fore, but always subservient to the Scripture's central 'focus.' It is important to recognize these other aspects, for otherwise the 'confessional focus' would come though in an empty and docetic way. David did engage in political activity; Solomon did establish certain ill-fated economic policies; Peter was moved by certain psychological impulses; Paul did use the Greek and Aramaic languages in his preaching. But such considerations are not central in Scripture. They are all subservient to the central 'focus' of the history of

redemption. In its most pregnant sense Scripture is not 'about' David, Solomon, Peter and Paul; it is all about Jesus Christ. What is primary is Scripture's concentration upon the 'confessional' meaning of the events recorded in their relatedness to Christ.

Scripture is a divine-human witness to real historical-redemptive events. But it is not an 'objective' chronicle of historical events. It is not ordinary historiography. It is prophetic history, interpreted history, history with a point. It [p.11>] explicates the meaning of the unfolding drama of redemption, one act after another, but always within this confessional focus. What binds one historical event after another together into a unified pattern of Christo-centric revelation is the Bible's sustained emphasis upon the 'confessional' meaning of these events.

Look briefly at a few more Biblical samples chosen at random. Archaeology is now able to paint a picture of Omri, King of Israel, far more detailed and illustrious than the very sober account given in the Bible. His international fame was apparently so great that foreigners referred to the whole land of Palestine as 'the House of Omri.' Yet Scripture passes all this by in silence. It disposes of Omri in seven brief verses (I Kings 16:21-28). How do we account for that? Such treatment of a royal personage reflects the kind of Book the Bible is. It sets Omri's reign into Scripture's own unique perspective. Within the historical context of buying the hill of Samaria and fortifying it, what we read of Omri is this: Omri did what was evil in the sight of the Lord; he did more evil than all who were before him. For he walked in the ways of Jereboam, in the sins by which he made Israel to sin, provoking the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger with their idols." That is the Bible's way of 'focussing in' on the whole life of Omri, stating in confessional language what is really of lasting importance about Omri, his contributions (negatively!) to the unfolding history of redemption on the way to the coming Christ.

Take another case. In the New Testament King Herod comes off looking very bad from the point of view of that which is Christo-centrally important in Biblical revelation. He is an agent of the dragon of Revelation 12 which stands ready to devour the Man-Child. Yet, from what we know about the political history of those times, Herod was a rather effective puppet ruler within the Roman regime. Why this contrast in perspectives? Once again, it seems to me, it is a matter of the Bible's unique 'focus.' Scripture does not deny Herod's military prowess, his architectural accomplishments, his psychic problems. There are, in fact, allusions to these things in the Gospels. But Scripture passes a different kind of judgment upon those who play their supporting roles in the history of redemption. But through it all Christ is the central and leading Player in the drama of salvation. From the view point of the 'confessional focus of Scripture what is most crucial about Herod is his embodiment of the spirit of the anti-Christ.

The same holds true for Pontius Pilate and more positively, for Abraham, Moses, Elijah, John the Baptist and the apostles. In each case the Bible deals with the real lives of real people, who as whole men take part in whole events. Accordingly Scripture hits upon one aspect of these events after another. Sometimes it even plays up a certain aspect quite strongly. Take, for example, the psychic disorders in the later life of King Saul. But again this is for the sake of sharpening Scripture's 'confessional focus' on Saul as an anti-theocratic king. Saul's psychic state of mind is not an independent theme. This aspect of his life, together with the political, economic and cultic aspects are there as the concrete historical framework for driving home this confessional message, "To obey is better than sacrifice..." This means that we may

not seek to derive psychological theories from the Saul passage. This is not the intent and purpose of Scripture. But Scripture does teach, confessionally, that no man—like Saul—can say ‘No, no, no’ to God’s clear ‘Yes, yes, yes’—with respect to David—without such defiance taking its heavy toll in one’s life (“an evil spirit of the Lord came upon him”). God is not mocked. Such rebellion leads finally to the door of the witch of Endor house. [p.12>]

We give expression to this same ‘confessional focus’ in many of our birth announcements. We thankfully proclaim on our printed cards: ‘The Lord has given us a child,’ or ‘another child,’ or ‘a son,’ or ‘a daughter.’ By this confessional statement we do not deny that sexual intercourse took place, nor that there was a nine month waiting period, nor that a doctor attended the delivery, nor that medicines and expenses were involved, nor that the state issued a birth certificate. These varied aspects of that great event are real. Yet, after all is said and done, we mean to say that all the aspects making up that event are gathered up in the confession, ‘The Lord hath given.’ That is our way of speaking Biblically about child-birth. It takes the deepest meaning of the event and puts it into true and clear ‘focus.’ In sharp contrast, for example, to birth announcements which reduce this event to economic categories ‘Announcing a new income tax exemption.’

Scripture never speaks in such reductionistic terms. Sometimes, indeed, Scripture plays heavily on the *biotic* motif, as, for example, in the untimely, unexpected, even ‘impossible’ birth of Isaac to the aged Abraham and Sarah. Sometimes *political* affairs loom large, as in the persistent troubles between the Judeans and Samaritans in rebuilding the temple. Sometimes the *aesthetic* gets large attention, as in descriptions of the grandeur of Solomon’s temple. Sometimes sociological relations play an important role, as in the conflicts between Jewish and Gentile Christians in the early church. Nevertheless, to *reduce* the Biblical message to one or another of these aspects is to miss the mark hermeneutically. All these aspects play a role subservient to the central, leading dominant ‘confessional focus’ of Scripture, namely, the consistent witness of all Scripture, in its total extent and in all its parts, to the redeeming work of God in Jesus Christ. As light passes through a prism, so Scripture takes these diverse rays of light and concentrates them in this ‘confessional focus’: “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself.”

This confessional hermeneutic finds strong support, I think, in the message of Psalm 127 “Unless the Lord build the house, those who build it labor in vain; unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.” The Psalmist is not ‘spiritualizing’ this building project. Real lumber and brick and mortar are involved. Nor does the Psalmist deny that it takes a lot of down-to-earth planning, saving and working to get the job done. Building a house is man’s work. All kinds of physical, economic, aesthetic, social, juridical and even ethical considerations enter into such an undertaking. Yet, with its own unique ‘focus.’ like an X-ray exposure, Scripture cuts through all the hard realities of human toil and gets at the heart of the matter by proclaiming: Without the blessing of the Lord all the sweat and tears (of joy and hardship) are in vain, empty, without content and meaning. Without God’s blessing the house defeats its real purpose for existence. The house (its foundations, walls, roof) may still *stand* but it no longer *stands for* obedient service in family living.

The same is true for guarding a city. Woe to the watchman who falls asleep at his post! Yet even if the watchmen stand guard day and night, and even if the guard is doubled and tripled, all these extra precautions will not help unless the Lord watches

over the city to protect it. ‘See, this is the ‘confessional focus’ of the Biblical message.

It seems to me that such a confessional hermeneutic is helpful in seeking to do justice to Scripture both as *history* of redemption and as history of *redemption*. [p.13>]

It offers us a hermeneutic key to help unlock the centrally and comprehensively Christo-centric meaning of Biblical revelation. It brings with it some built-in safeguards against reductionistic interpretations of the Bible, whether they be the moralistic reductionisms of the exemplary method or the historical reductionisms of the historical-critical method. It offers promising possibilities for a confessional theology, that is, a theological hermeneutic which is in harmony with our Reformed confessions concerning the nature of Biblical authority. It seeks to overcome the ever-present tendency toward dualistic-dialectical tensions between confession and theology. In this hermeneutic faith and science can be kept together in an integrally unified and meaningful working relationship. Our Reformed confessions can be given full and free play to function meaningfully in our interpretation of the Bible as the Word of God *in* the words of men.

Postscript: confessional hermeneutics and Biblical history

The confessional hermeneutic, here proposed, seeks to escape the strong tendencies abroad in contemporary theology to *historicize* Scripture, that is, to *absolutize* the historical aspect of Scripture, or, looking at it from the other side to *reduce* the fullness of the Biblical message to its historical aspect. The central, leading, dominant focus of Scripture is on the confessional, not the historical. What kind of Book is the Bible? At heart it is not a history Book, but a confessing Book, a Book which confesses, testifies, witnesses, declares, proclaims the mighty acts of God in the history of redemption in a Christo-centric way. That is its ‘focus.’

Yet the historical aspect does have its place in Scripture. We may not make too much of it (e.g. Liberalism and the historical-critical method). But we may not make too little of it either (e.g. Bultmann’s kerygmatic method). It is one aspect, one facet in the wholeness of Biblical revelation. The repeated claims of Scripture that its message is securely anchored in real historical events must be upheld. Otherwise we are left with a ‘confessional focus’ which is docetic, empty of historical reality. Then we come close to Bultmann’s *kerygma*, a view of the Biblical message cut loose from its historical base. Then in the end we have nothing more than a cut-flower gospel—a flower severed from its roots, no longer implanted firmly in the sub-soil of biblical history which therefore soon withers in our hands.

This explains my concern about a theological-historical method, a biblical hermeneutic which holds, for example, that scientifically we can say no more about the resurrection of Christ than about a medieval myth, namely, that some people believed that it happened, thus excluding the possibility of saying anything meaningful about the historical reality of the resurrection event itself. A method which undercuts the historical reality of biblical revelation in this way also renders the Bible’s confessional message dubious. As Paul puts it, If Christ be not raised from the dead—that is, really, actually, historically raised—then our faith is in vain (1 Corinthians 15).

This also explains my concern with a hermeneutic which reduces our understanding of Genesis 1-11 to a ‘teaching model.’ On such a view, denial of the historical reality of the events there recorded leaves us with a confessional message which is empty of

historical significance, end thus indeed only a ‘teaching model.’ The historical-critical, method or any hermeneutic which empties the Bible’s ‘confessional focus’ of real *historical*-redemptive content leaves us with a docetic view of Scripture.

Gordon J. Spykman is associate Professor of Religion and Theology at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

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