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JOURNAL OF  
THE TRANSACTIONS  
OF  
**The Victoria Institute**  
OR  
Philosophical Society of Great Britain

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VOL. LXXXVII

1955



LONDON:

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PUBLISHED BY  
THE INSTITUTE, 22 DINGWALL ROAD, CROYDON, SURREY

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927TH ORDINARY GENERAL MEETING

OF THE

# VICTORIA INSTITUTE

AT

THE CAXTON HALL

WESTMINSTER, S.W. 1

ON

MONDAY, 14th FEBRUARY, 1955

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REV. H. L. ELLISON, B.A., B.D., in the Chair

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## TRENDS IN NEW TESTAMENT INTERPRETATION

By

F. F. BRUCE, M.A.

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THE VICTORIA INSTITUTE

22 DINGWALL ROAD, CROYDON, SURREY

# TRENDS IN NEW TESTAMENT INTERPRETATION

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## SYNOPSIS

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Some radical trends are mentioned, in particular that of the "demythologizing" school. Then, after a glance at such preliminary disciplines as New Testament linguistics, textual study and source criticism, the most striking trend of New Testament interpretation to-day is said to be that which discerns its basic unity in the saving message to which it bears witness. The implications of this unity are surveyed in their bearing on the Author of salvation, the way of salvation, and the heirs of salvation.

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WHEN I was first invited to prepare this paper for the Institute, the suggestion was made that I should deal with *conservative* trends in New Testament interpretation. It seemed better, however, not to restrict the scope of the paper in this way, since exclusive concentration on one set of trends might give a distorted impression of the situation as a whole.

### *Conservative and Radical Trends*

In fact, if we look at New Testament studies in this country during recent years, we do (with certain outstanding exceptions) get a generally conservative picture. But "the truth is that, while most British work is highly conservative . . . , on the Continent we are witnessing an odd combination—often in one and the same scholar—of a positively reactionary dogmatic theology and a New Testament criticism which is still very largely destructive."<sup>1</sup> In America, the older liberalism is still more firmly entrenched in Biblical studies than it is either in the British Isles or in Europe. A good popular example of the American position may be found in *The Interpreter's Bible*, which consists of the texts of the A.V. and R.S.V. with exegetical and expository commentaries, to be published in twelve large volumes, six for the Old Testament and six for the New.

<sup>1</sup> G. H. C. MacGregor in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 5 (1952), pp. 197 f., in a review of A. M. Hunter, *Interpreting the New Testament 1900-1950* (London, 1951). Immediately before the words quoted above, MacGregor says: "It is, e.g., only when most Continental work and much American is completely ignored that one can claim that 'most scholars would agree' that 'Acts is the work of Luke' (p. 111), or that in connexion with the Fourth Gospel 'the conservative position does not look nearly so indefensible as it did, say, twenty years ago' (p. 85)."

“The scores of contributors of introductory articles or of exegetic and homiletical commentary represent virtually every large Protestant church in America and Britain, as well as every critical position from extreme ‘left’ to right of centre.”<sup>1</sup>

Among those trends which are far from being conservative, the one which calls for first comment is the “demythologizing” school led by Rudolf Bultmann of Marburg.<sup>2</sup> This school maintains that the record of God’s saving activity in the New Testament is presented in a form presupposing a mythological conception of the universe which obscures the true challenge of the gospel to modern man. This “mythological” conception is not simply a question of the three-decker pre-Copernican universe which supplies a framework for early statements of Christian faith; it involves the very essence of the saving message itself. Bultmann and others, anxious to remove from the presentation of the gospel every stumbling-block except the stumbling-block of the cross, propose to “demythologize” the New Testament *kerygma* and restate it in terms of contemporary existentialism. While Bultmann’s personal faith in Jesus as the Word made flesh safeguards his own Christian position, it is not clear that the crucial decision to which his restatement of the gospel challenges modern man has any essential connection with historic Christianity. For all his evangelistic intention, the practical effect of his “demythologizing” treatment of the New Testament message is only too likely to be the throwing out of the baby with the bath-water. But it is salutary to be reminded that our presentation of the gospel, to be effective, must be intelligible and relevant to our hearers, although what we present will cease to be the gospel unless it retains not only the offence of the cross in an existentialist sense but also proper emphasis on the historic event which took place once for all “under Pontius Pilate”.

Bultmann’s name is associated also with a thorough-going historical scepticism which can find no certainty that the things recorded of Jesus in the Gospels took place as the narrative says, since the narrative reflects the faith of the early Christians rather than facts about the life and character of Christ.<sup>3</sup> In this he commands the agreement of several English theologians who do not share his views on “demythologization”. But this pessimism is unwarranted, and if it were not corrected its tendency would be disastrous. It is good to quote the forthright attack on this

<sup>1</sup> W. F. Albright in *BASOR*, No. 127 (October, 1952), p. 32. “Farthest to the ‘right’,” he says, “are the contributions of the reviewer and his pupils; farthest to the ‘left’ are contributions reflecting typical O.T. and N.T. positions a generation ago.”

<sup>2</sup> See *Kerygma and Myth*, edited by H. W. Bartsch and translated by R. H. Fuller (London, 1953), containing essays by Bultmann and others. A brief account of the points at issue is given by Ian Henderson, *Myth in the New Testament* (London, 1952).

<sup>3</sup> See Bultmann’s *Jesus and the Word* (Eng. tr., London, 1935), p. 8.

defeatist attitude by such an old-fashioned liberal as the late C. J. Cadoux: "That the facts are unascertainable, or that they are totally indistinguishable from the beliefs held in the Church, I roundly deny—and I deny it on historical grounds, which any investigator can test for himself."<sup>1</sup>

Quite different from this historical scepticism is such a radical reconstruction of New Testament history as we find, for example, in S. G. F. Brandon's *The Fall of Jerusalem and the Christian Church* (London, 1951). This work, brilliant in its learning and imaginative reinterpretation (but, in my judgment, too often brilliantly erratic), dates almost all the non-Pauline parts of the New Testament after the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and traces the influence of that event in them one way or another. He finds that Alexandrian Christianity played a much greater part in the formation of certain New Testament books than is usually supposed; but if his conclusions are accepted, we must believe that most of the New Testament writings are thoroughly tendentious compositions which let slip the real truth of the matter only occasionally and accidentally. Those who dissent most wholeheartedly from his conclusions, however, will admit that such a challenge to conservative beliefs is a welcome and invigorating stimulus.

### *Preliminary Disciplines*

Only the most cursory reference can be made in this paper to some preparatory lines of study on which New Testament interpretation must be based. The study of the language of the New Testament has been carried forward materially of late by the appearance of C. F. D. Moule's *Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge, 1953). The third volume of J. H. Moulton and W. F. Howard's *Grammar of New Testament Greek*<sup>2</sup>—the volume dealing with syntax—has been entrusted, since Dr. Howard's untimely death in 1952, to Dr. H. G. Meecham, who is no novice in Hellenistic studies.

Textual criticism continues to be pursued by the small band of scholars who have the requisite aptitude and equipment. We are being given an increasingly clear picture of the state of the New Testament text in the second half of the second century. A fine example of the sort of work that is being carried on may be seen in the 1946 Schweich Lectures on the *Corpus Paulinum* by G. Zuntz, recently published under the title *The Text of the Epistles* (London, 1953). Special attention is paid here to the codex P 46, the oldest manuscript of the Pauline Epistles, which itself may be as early as the end of the second century. Whether it will be possible in the foreseeable future to press this research back into the first century is not

<sup>1</sup> *The Life of Jesus* (Pelican Books, 1948), p. 211.

<sup>2</sup> Vol. I (Prolegomena) was published by T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, in 1906, Vol. II in 1929.

certain; we must, however, always reckon with the possibility of further illuminating discoveries. The recent finds in the Judaean desert (to be precise, those from Khirbet Mird) have included some textual material for the New Testament, of date between the fifth and eighth centuries. Much later manuscript material has been made accessible in microfilm form as a result of American expeditions in 1949 and 1950 to the chief ancient libraries of the Near East.<sup>1</sup> The possibility of the survival of genuine readings in later manuscripts when they have disappeared from earlier and generally more trustworthy copies is taken seriously by textual scholars to-day; and the widest possible range of evidence is being covered by those who, on an international footing, are at present preparing a completely new and comprehensive critical apparatus to the Greek New Testament, using the Byzantine text as the most convenient base.<sup>2</sup>

It is impossible within present limits to say anything worth while about source criticism, another basic discipline. Both documentary analysis and form criticism make it plain that the main outlines of the primitive apostolic message, of the teaching of Jesus and of the doctrine of His person and work, had taken shape in the period before our written Gospels, and indeed before the earliest of the New Testament writings. Some new lines of approach, such as those which detect intricate (not to say fantastic) patterns in the Gospels<sup>3</sup> or those which account for their structure in calendrical terms,<sup>4</sup> do not command confidence. When Vincent Taylor's monumental commentary on *The Gospel according to St. Mark* appeared in the Macmillan series in 1952, some devotees of these newer lines of approach described it as marking the end of an era. It is safe to say that his commentary will be used and valued when much work of the passing fashion is forgotten.

### *The Unity of the New Testament Message*

Let us leave these preliminary matters, and come to some main lines of interpretation. Among these, there is none so important (I think) as the increasing recognition of the unity of the New Testament.<sup>5</sup> This in turn is coming to be recognized as part of a still wider unity—that of the

<sup>1</sup> See K. W. Clark, "Exploring the Manuscripts of Sinai and Jerusalem", *The Biblical Archaeologist* 16 (1953), pp. 22 ff. Microfilms of the MSS. photographed may be obtained at cost price from the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>2</sup> See the volume of *prolegomena* to this work, *New Testament Manuscript Studies: The Materials and the Making of a Critical Apparatus*, ed. M. M. Parvis and A. P. Wikgren (Chicago, 1950).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. A. M. Farrer, *A Study in St. Mark* (London, 1952); *St. Matthew and St. Mark* (London, 1954).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. P. Carrington, *The Earliest Christian Calendar* (Cambridge, 1952). A more persuasive calendrical approach, relating the order of the Fourth Gospel to the festival lessons in the triennial synagogue lectionary, is made in a thesis (thus far unpublished) by Miss A. E. Guilding; in this case we have the *datum* that the central part of this Gospel is constructed around the succession of Jewish festivals.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. A. M. Hunter, *The Unity of the New Testament* (London, 1943).

whole Bible.<sup>1</sup> Such a unity can be recognized and maintained only when the writings of both Testaments are viewed in the sense of our Lord's words quoted in John 5 : 39, "these are they which bear witness of me." This recognition of the basic unity of the message of the Bible goes hand in hand with the contemporary revival of Biblical theology.<sup>2</sup> That this revival is in some degree dictated by the failure of the older liberalism to cope with the predicament in which mankind finds itself to-day is probable enough. "The climate of thought has so changed," as the Bishop of Durham has put it, "that theologians commonly see it as their function not to demonstrate the validity of the Christian faith by the methods of contemporary secular thought so much as to study the Biblical revelation in its own categories and to draw from it some light to guide our steps in a dark world where diabolical forces are seeking whom they may devour."<sup>3</sup>

The unitive theme of the New Testament is its recital of the good news of salvation, focused in the person and work of Jesus the Messiah—and the Old Testament has its own contribution to make to this recital.

In 1952 C. H. Dodd produced a book entitled *According to the Scriptures*, with sub-title "The Sub-structure of New Testament Theology". Here he examines the use of Old Testament quotations as "testimonies" in the apostolic preaching, and finds that, far from being a haphazard anthology of proof-texts adduced for their verbal aptness, these quotations exhibit "the rudiments of an original, coherent and flexible method of exegesis" which had regard to the historical Old Testament context and involved an interpretation of history as subject to the sovereignty of God, whose "impact upon human society reveals itself negatively as judgment upon human action, positively as power of renewal, or redemption. This two-fold rhythm of the pattern of history finds characteristic expression in terms of death and resurrection." And he suggests that if we look for the "creative mind of no ordinary spiritual and intellectual quality" from which Paul and John and the author of Hebrews alike received this "most original and fruitful process of rethinking the Old Testament", we need not look farther than the mind of Christ. The implications of this suggestion are of the most far-reaching importance.

Nearly twenty years ago Professor Dodd gave us one of the best-known works on the unity of the New Testament message in *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* (London, 1936). There he demonstrated

<sup>1</sup> Cf. H. H. Rowley, *The Unity of the Bible* (London, 1953).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the encyclopaedic *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, successive volumes of which have been published at Stuttgart since 1933; some of the most important articles have been translated into English as separate books in the series *Bible Key Words*, published by A. and C. Black, London. Other products of this movement are the series of *Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments* published by the Zwingli Verlag in Zürich and *Studies in Biblical Theology* published by the S.C.M. Press, London.

<sup>3</sup> A. M. Ramsey, *F. D. Maurice and the Conflicts of Modern Theology* (Cambridge, 1951), p. 111.



that the main outline of the apostolic gospel—the *kerygma*—underlies the Gospels (providing in particular the thread on which the separate sections of Mark are strung<sup>1</sup>), the primitive speeches in Acts, the Pauline letters, Hebrews, and 1 Peter. One corollary of this was the refutation of the view that the gospel of redemption by the death and resurrection of the incarnate Son of God was a Pauline creation, drawn in part from Hellenistic mystery cults. It confirmed Paul's own assertion that, so far as the record of the saving events was concerned, his preaching was in complete agreement with that of the other apostles<sup>2</sup>. It implies, indeed, that this common proclamation rests upon the historic events themselves—and upon Christ's own interpretation of the events<sup>3</sup>.

Anything that can be said here about Dodd's major work, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge, 1953), must be totally inadequate. It is one of those books which must be lived with to be properly appreciated. When he gave his inaugural lecture as Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity at Cambridge in 1938, he said: "I am disposed to think that the understanding of the Fourth Gospel is not only one of the outstanding tasks of our time, but the crucial test of our success or failure in solving the problem of the New Testament as a whole. The Fourth Gospel may well prove to be the keystone of an arch which at present fails to hold together."<sup>4</sup> But however we may or may not follow Professor Dodd in his endeavour to put the keystone in place, and whatever we may think of his view that John is concerned to commend the Christian message to "a wide public consisting primarily of devout and thoughtful persons . . . in the varied and cosmopolitan society of a great Hellenistic city such as Ephesus under the Roman Empire" in terms which would be familiar to them, this at least is plain throughout the work: that what John commends to his readers at the end of the first century is the authentic gospel. The evangelist remains true to the apostolic preaching; he "has deliberately set his feet firmly upon the ground of the common Christian tradition"; and he insists all the more on the *agape* character of the new relation into which believers enter with God and with one another

<sup>1</sup> This particular argument is developed in Dodd's article "The Framework of the Gospel Narrative", *The Expository Times* 43 (1931-2), pp. 396 ff. (reprinted in his volume of *New Testament Studies* [Manchester, 1953], pp. 1 ff.).

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. 15: 11. The summary in verses 3-7 appears to be an extract from the outline of the gospel as Paul first preached it at Corinth, nor did this outline originate with him; he himself had "received" it in turn. Cf. 1 Cor. 11: 23 for the beginning of another extract from the *kerygma*; there, too, the same terms for "receiving" and "delivering" are used.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. A. M. Hunter, *Interpreting Paul's Gospel* (London, 1954), for the latest exposition of the view that Paul derived his gospel from Christ. This book presents the Sprunt Lectures for 1954, delivered in Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Virginia; the same thesis was defended in the Sprunt Lectures for 1921 by J. G. Machen in *The Origin of Paul's Religion*—a work which ought to be better known on this side of the Atlantic.

<sup>4</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Present Task of New Testament Studies* (Cambridge, 1938), p. 29.

“because the crucial act of *agape* was actually performed in history, on an April day about A.D. 30, at a supper table in Jerusalem, in a garden across the Kidron valley, in the headquarters of Pontius Pilate, and on a Roman cross at Golgotha. So concrete, so actual, is the nature of the divine *agape*; yet none the less for that, by entering into the relation of *agape* thus opened up for men, we may dwell in God and He in us.”<sup>1</sup>

### *Three Strands*

In considering the unity of the New Testament in much contemporary interpretation, it will be useful to distinguish (as others have done) three strands. The threefold cord of the record of salvation which runs through all Scripture and holds it together comprises its witness to the Author of salvation, to the way of salvation, and to the heirs of salvation.

### *The Author of Salvation*

At one time it was regarded as almost the inevitable duty of a student of the New Testament in general, and of the Gospels in particular, that he should crown his studies by writing a *Life of Jesus*. Some of these *Lives* of earlier days acquired great fame; a few, indeed, were accorded by the generation to whose condition they spoke something like the status of a fifth Gospel. More recently the tendency has been to agree with the late Dean Inge, who was once invited to write a *Life of Christ* for a popular series and replied on a postcard: “As there are no materials for a life of Christ, I regret that I cannot comply with your request.” No doubt he meant that, since we have practically no information for nine-tenths of our Saviour’s life, a biography in the ordinary sense is out of the question. Those who have succumbed to the historical scepticism mentioned earlier in this paper feel that biographical material is too scanty even for the remaining tenth. And perhaps others realize that the man who assays to write a *Life of Jesus* may divulge more of his inner self than he intends: “it may be said of all the theological schools of thought: By their *Lives* of Jesus ye shall know them”<sup>2</sup>—and, we may add, it may equally well be said of individual writers. Yet there are some who experience an inward compulsion to undertake the task. “There is nothing our world needs more than a fresh and truer vision of the Life of lives”, says A. M. Hunter,<sup>3</sup> who has himself provided the groundwork for such an enterprise in *The Work and Words of Jesus* (London, 1950). And now Vincent Taylor, after many years of intensive and accurate Gospel study, has given us an affirmative answer to the question “Could a Life of Jesus be written?” in the

<sup>1</sup> On general questions raised by the Fourth Gospel see P. H. Menoud, *L'évangile de Jean d'après les recherches récentes* (Paris and Neuchatel, 1947).

<sup>2</sup> T. W. Manson, in *The Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. C. W. Dugmore (London, 1944), p. 92.

<sup>3</sup> *Interpreting the New Testament 1900–1950*, p. 60.

enlarged version of the second series of his Speaker's Lectures at Oxford: *The Life and Ministry of Jesus* (London, 1954). These scholars believe, and rightly so, that it is not so impossible as others have maintained to base a consecutive narrative of the public ministry of our Lord on the New Testament records.

But, granted that this is so, how are we to interpret His life and ministry? Here the primary task is to discover what His own interpretation was, and it is impressive to mark what appears to be a growing body of opinion in support of the view that the prophetic portrait of the obedient and suffering Servant of Yahweh, sketched in various places in the second half of the Book of Isaiah, determined our Lord's understanding and fulfilment of His mission. For a recent exposition of this viewpoint, T. W. Manson's little book *The Servant-Messiah* (Cambridge, 1953) may be commended.<sup>1</sup> All the "messianic" figures and functions of Old Testament revelation and expectation meet in Him, but it is through His accomplishment of the mission of the Servant that they too find their fulfilment. It was thus, too, that He made possible the realization of the good news announced in His earliest preaching: "The kingdom of God has come near."<sup>2</sup>

A widely accepted interpretation of Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God represents His message as being from the outset "The kingdom of God has arrived" (rather than "has come near") and speaks of His ministry as "realized eschatology"—an expression first used, apparently, by C. H. Dodd in *Parables of the Kingdom* (London, 1935), p. 51. No doubt our Lord proclaimed, at the beginning of His Galilean ministry, that the time of fulfilment had come (Mark 1:15), and in their exposition of "realized eschatology" Dodd and others<sup>3</sup> have taught us much that is helpful and illuminating in itself as well as being a corrective to an exaggerated futurism; but whether or not it can still be said that a wholly "realized eschatology" destroys "the cruciality of the cross",<sup>4</sup> as it has been accused of doing in its earlier expression, this at least is true, that it fails to take adequate account of the part played by the Second Advent in the primitive apostolic preaching. For in that preaching the Second Advent is something more than mankind's "last frontier-post" where "we shall encounter God in Christ";<sup>5</sup> it is the consummation of the series

<sup>1</sup> Cf. also V. Taylor, *Jesus and His Sacrifice* (London, 1937), J. W. Bowman, *The Intention of Jesus* (London, 1945), C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures* (London, 1952), and J. Jeremias, *Servant of God* (London, 1955), for this interpretation. That most of the New Testament writers (not excluding Paul) interpreted the work of Christ in terms of the Servant seems plain; no O.T. passage has stamped itself so indelibly on the N.T. as the fourth Servant Song, Isa. 52: 13-53: 12.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. R. H. Fuller, *The Mission and Achievement of Jesus* (London, 1954), pp. 20 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. also J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (Eng. tr., London, 1954).

<sup>4</sup> This charge is made by R. H. Fuller, *op. cit.*, pp. 49 ff. I do not believe it is valid against more recent statements of the theory.

<sup>5</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Coming of Christ* (Cambridge, 1951).

of Christ's saving acts, the one act of the series that remains unfulfilled in history, but an act which, because of what has already been accomplished, is as sure as if it were already history—the V-Day whose advent is guaranteed by the D-Day that is past, to use Oscar Cullmann's topical metaphor.<sup>1</sup>

That the futurist element cannot be excluded from Christ's own eschatological teaching has been argued afresh of late by G. R. Beasley-Murray in *Jesus and the Future* (London, 1954), where the unity and authenticity of the eschatological discourse ascribed to Jesus in Mark 13 (and parallels) are conclusively vindicated. Recent attempts to reinterpret this discourse as a symbolical prediction of the Passion carry little conviction.<sup>2</sup>

### *The Way of Salvation*

When we come to the second strand, the way of salvation, there is little room for disagreement.<sup>3</sup> Entrance into the kingdom—which is synonymous with entrance into life eternal, the life of the age to come, to be anticipated and enjoyed here and now—is granted by God's grace, procured for us by the suffering and triumph of the Son of Man, and received by faith in Him. This was the teaching of Christ, as it was later of Paul and of the other apostles. That the basic principles of this teaching were proclaimed in advance by the Old Testament prophets is maintained by N. H. Snaith in *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (London, 1944).<sup>4</sup> And Snaith is in good company here, if we recall Peter's testimony to Christ in the house of Cornelius: "To him bear all the prophets witness, that through his name every one that believeth on him shall receive remission of sins" (Acts 10:43).

### *The Heirs of Salvation*

One of the most striking features of Biblical interpretation in the last quarter of a century has been the increasing recognition of the importance of the doctrine of the Church in the New Testament.<sup>5</sup> The appreciation of the unity of the Bible has led to a fresh study of the relation of the people of God under the new covenant to the people of God under the old. The opinion, frequently expressed in the heyday of liberalism, that Jesus

<sup>1</sup> See his *Christ and Time* (London, 1951).

<sup>2</sup> E.g. R. H. Lightfoot, *The Gospel Message of St. Mark* (Oxford, 1950), pp. 48 ff.

<sup>3</sup> This statement is an over-simplification; interpreters differ, e.g., on the question whether and to what extent the sacraments form an important or essential part of saving faith in the New Testament.

<sup>4</sup> See especially the last chapter: "The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament as they appear in the New Testament".

<sup>5</sup> Cf., e.g., R. N. Flew, *Jesus and His Church* (London, 1938); G. Johnston, *The Doctrine of the Church in the New Testament* (Cambridge, 1943); K. L. Schmidt, *The Church* (Eng. tr., London, 1950).

never intended to found a church, is not so commonly voiced to-day. To be sure, the kingdom which He proclaimed is not to be identified or confused with the church which He founded. The kingdom of God is that new order of life in which God is loved and obeyed as Father and King and His regenerative blessings are enjoyed by His children; but such a new order of life can only be lived out in fellowship with others. The Church, that is to say, should manifest the Kingdom.

This principle of fellowship is insisted on in the teaching of Jesus, even if we cannot go all the way with T. W. Manson in his societary interpretation of the Son of Man.<sup>1</sup> As Christ Himself is the living bond which binds the old covenant-people to the new, so His first disciples by their union with Him are both the last faithful remnant of the old and the first faithful nucleus of the new. And it is by virtue of their union with Him that His people in this age, generation after generation, are bound together in the fellowship of His Church. The various New Testament expressions used to convey the union between Christ and His people have lately been subjects of special study—none more so than the conception of the Church as the body of Christ, in which some have found an ontological and not a metaphorical expression.<sup>2</sup> It is doubtful exegesis, however, to single out one of the expressions thus used for ontological status in preference to others. Yet this at least emerges from such a study: that as Christ on earth discharged His messianic ministry in "the body of His flesh", so from heaven He continues to discharge it by His Spirit in His people, in "the church which is His body". If there are serious objections to considering the Church as the extension of Christ's incarnation, there can be none to viewing it as the continuation of His ministry.<sup>3</sup>

### Conclusion

Much more might be added with regard to the Church's ministry, apostolic or otherwise, with regard to Christian initiation, the seal of the Spirit, the sacraments and so on, for New Testament interpretation to-day is actively concerned with these subjects. But to do so would be to make completely unmanageable a survey which is getting that way already.

<sup>1</sup> *The Teaching of Jesus* (Cambridge, 1935), pp. 211 ff. The "Son of Man", according to this view, is an "embodiment of the Remnant idea"; it is "an ideal figure and stands for the manifestation of the Kingdom of God on earth in a people wholly devoted to their heavenly King". When the people did not respond to Jesus' public appeal, and when even His chosen band of disciples proved unequal to the demands of the ideal, He fulfilled it alone in His suffering as the Servant-Messiah, becoming then in resurrection the head of the new humanity.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. J. A. T. Robinson, *The Body* (London, 1952); also T. F. Torrance in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 7 (1954), p. 245: "The Church is the Body of Christ—that is no mere figure but reality."

<sup>3</sup> Cf. E. Schweizer, *Das Leben des Herrn in der Gemeinde und ihren Diensten* (Zürich, 1946); T. W. Manson, *The Church's Ministry* (London, 1948).

The conclusion of the whole matter is this: that present trends in New Testament interpretation show a determination to take these documents seriously as the written deposit of God's saving act in Christ, manifested in the fullness of time, and to look to them for a divine word of mercy and judgment, of wisdom and salvation, which will guide us in our present predicament as it has guided others in the crises of the past.