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A table of contents for *Scripture* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_scripture-01.php

Scripture

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MATTHEW REVISITED

In 1956 W. Marxsen published his *Der Evangelist Markus*¹ and in 1960 H. Conzelmann his *Die Mitte der Zeit*²—two works which opened up new perspectives in the study of synoptic theology. For while the last decades had investigated synoptic theology almost totally under the aegis of form criticism, these authors, in their examinations of the underlying basic theological notions governing Mark and Luke, employed a method of investigation (already shown to be fruitful in Old Testament research) which centred around the editorial processes (*Redaktionsgeschichte*) exhibited by the individual authors when the gospels were in their final stage of formation. We had been able to distinguish three strata of tradition in the formation of the gospels: the level of what Christ had said and done; the level of the transmission of the primitive Church which allowed the accounts of Christ to be moulded by the preoccupations of the Church after Easter; lastly, the level of the evangelists themselves where we are concerned to define the role of each evangelist in the choice, combination and formulation of passages (and groups of passages) transmitted by written or oral sources. Now whereas form criticism was mainly attracted to exploring the second of these levels and to the individual pericopae found in the gospels, the newer approach (which does not neglect the worthy contribution of form criticism) is devoted to examining the third stratum, the work of the evangelists, and this to try to discern the personal theological preoccupations which marked their differing presentations of the one gospel. It attempts to isolate the evangelist's influence on transmitted material and so establish the basic theological thread running through and binding together his gospel. Important work, we have said, on Mark and Luke introduced a renewed study of the theological ground-plan of each synoptist. How has Matthew, for too long without prestige in independent criticism, fared in this latest trend? Rudolf Schnackenburg lists three principal attempts to uncover the guide line of Matthew's theology within the framework of

¹ Second edition, 1959.

² English translation *The Theology of St Luke*, London 1960.

thought we have been discussing : the studies of G. Bornkamm, G. Strecker and W. Trilling.¹

We may examine Bornkamm's investigations under three headings : the expectation of the end of the world and the Church, ecclesiology and Christology in the perspectives of the abasement and the earthly function of Jesus in terms of judgment.

The basic thought of Bornkamm's first postulate for Matthew's Gospel recalls much earlier work, but Bornkamm has followed a different and more modern approach in his research and has probed more fully into the various suggestions on this theme. His starting point is the particular link between the idea of the Church and the expectation of the Last Judgment—the Church must be seen *sub specie iudicii*. Judgment and threat of judgment, and the notion of the Church interact and there is an association and transposition of images. Hence the present actuality that is the Church must be sharply distinguished from the future—and it is only a future—'Kingdom'. Such texts as Matt. 16:18 'And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it' and Matt. 18:18 'Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven' must be understood in terms of a judgment shortly to come : the gates of hell, the powers of darkness, will confront the present community, the Church, and the sacrifice and suffering this confrontation will cause the Church, will be that judgment from which the Church will emerge triumphant—the 'Kingdom'. The judgment will be extended to that which is hostile to the Church on earth, a 'binding', as also to that which is favourable to her, a 'loosening'. Bornkamm translates to the future, consequent on the judgment, the saying of Matt. 21:43 'Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it'; the kingdom will be given to those who have already realised the claims of the Church and have been recognised as such in the judgment.

One feels immediately on reading Bornkamm's thesis that this eschatological character of the Church is far too thin, too enclosed. It is true that Christ refers to the kingdom of God as imminent and suggests that the *eschaton* is a reality near at hand. We must still await

¹ *New Testament Theology Today*, London 1963, pp. 68ff. The three studies in question are as follows : G. Bornkamm, 'Enderwartung und Kirche in Matthäus-Evangelium', in *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology*, ed. W. D. Davies and D. Daube, Cambridge 1956, pp. 222-60 ; this is available in English, in Bornkamm, Barth, Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, London 1963, pp. 15-51 ; G. Strecker, *Der Weg der Gerechtigkeit*, Göttingen 1962 ; W. Trilling, *Das wahre Israel* 3rd ed., Munchen 1964.

definitive studies on what the primitive Church understood by this—there are different, even if converging, notions in Paul, John, Hebrews, the Catholic Epistles and the Apocalypse. One of the most troublesome questions facing biblical theology today is to describe the position of the Christian in terms of an existence at once subject to a coming judgment and yet sharing in a victory that has brought salvation. To interpret that judgement 'existentially' to mean man's understanding of himself consequent on his liberation from a tortured existence due to acceptance of the grace of God and renewed commitment to him has its significance, but neglects the rich inheritance Christianity offers. The Christian message is not confined to liberating man from his situation and from himself. On the other hand, to see judgment as something belonging to a distant future is to ignore the present demands of Christ's message which has placed us in the biblical tension of 'promise and fulfilment'. George Knight has well described that tension when he writes :

Half a century ago R. H. Charles could subtitle his monumental study of Eschatology : 'A Critical History of the Doctrine of a Future Life.' That is to say, he conceived of the idea of the *eschaton*, the End, as the life that lies beyond what we know as death. Today we give the word Eschatology a different and wider connotation . . . The word still includes for us all that Charles understood by the term. But it also reminds us that the total experience of God's grace known to Israel was an experience that was meaningful actually while it was being experienced. It reminds us that this life which we live here on this earth is itself significant for eternity, and that eternity is actually shaped and moulded by the purpose of God as that purpose works out in *this* life that we know here and now . . . The word Eschatology, then, as we use it today, seeks to express the biblical conception of the other dimension that is integrated with and conditioned by the response of men and women to the call of God in each of God's 'todays'.¹

Bornkamm, while recalling the final challenge of the Church by restating this in terms of her relationship to the awaited judgment, does not sufficiently stress the sharing *now*, by the Church, of those benefits which God's *Kingdom* has made available. True, God's rule over all men obediently subject to Him does not exactly correspond with the notion of the Church—the Church is his *Kingdom in fieri*. But we do not have to wait until the judgment to experience the fruits of God's rule.

The second thread Bornkamm discerns in Matthew's theological pattern is a linking up of the notion of the Church with an understanding of Christ by means of his abasement. The lowliness of the Messiah, the Son of Man, is in contrast to his future glory as *Kyrios*. And whereas Christ is presented as 'Teacher' and the Apostles as 'disciples' so too the transposition of Christ to 'Lord' implies a similar transposition of disciples to the 'just' and the 'chosen' :

¹ *A Christian Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 213f.

'Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father' (Matt. 13:43) and 'He will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other' (Matt. 24:31). Bornkamm takes the opportunity, once more, to underline how these promises—like the role of Christ as *Kyrios*—belong to the *future* Kingdom inaugurated with the judgment. If one points to such a text as Matt. 12:28 'But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you', Bornkamm would answer that this characterises not some present time of salvation but only a 'period of decision'—man's acceptance of God's challenge of commitment by means of His grace. Bornkamm does, however, see in Matt. 12:31f. 'Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever says a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come' three different periods envisaged: the time of Jesus, the time of the Church (this present aeon) and the coming aeon. The contrast between these is that the first two stand under that judgment governed by the abasement of Christ while the third is characterised by his glory. Various other texts, including Matt. 12:13f., add up to the contrast between the earthly abasement of Jesus and his future judgment and glory.

Because Bornkamm believes that the Church in Matthew is not yet completely severed from a link with the synagogue, the Old Testament and the New, the Church and Judaism are joined together, and together stand under judgment, and the earthly function of Jesus as Messiah is, before all, the manifestation of that judgment: 'Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them' (Matt. 5:17). Consequent to this judgment, Bornkamm sees (in what he believes to be the third thread in Matthew's theological pattern) the possibility of radical justification. Faith and love are to be the two staffs of support before the judgment of the Messiah. Bornkamm is surely employing Pauline, rather than Matthaean, concepts when he sees the disciples linked to judgment and justification via faith in Christ. For his thesis he interprets in this sense the episode of the Centurion with its final saying: 'Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith' (Matt. 8:10) and that of Matt. 21:32, 'For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the harlots believed him; and even when you saw it, you did not afterward repent and believe him.' Finally, there is the 'Woe' of Matt. 23:23 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you tithe the mint and dill and cummin, and

have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done without neglecting the others'.

It would be too much to expect that Bornkamm's view of the basic theological preoccupations governing St Matthew's Gospel will find general acceptance (even if a number of scholars are following his lead—G. Barth, M. J. Fiedler, T. Hummel). Besides the observations already made on his opinions, we must note that Bornkamm has approached Matthew from the standpoint of a certain school of thought which sees all exegesis coloured by existential-eschatological theories. That this approach will have an appeal to many is doubtless (as the influence of Bultmann witnesses) and there is an importance in recalling the notions of judgment, eschatology, the profound humiliation of Christ mirroring the difficulties of the human situation. But Matthew has more than this. Not to speak of the polemical dialogue with his contemporary Judaism, hostile to the Church; the problem of continuity and breaking away from the older people of God; the reality of the 'time' of Jesus and the 'time' of the Church as being times of salvation, as times of fulfilment even if incompletely so; the exaltation of Christ as 'Lord' inaugurating his Kingdom and establishing the Church: 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age' (Matt. 28:18ff.)—there are deeper waters bypassed by Bornkamm. In his hurry to juxtapose modern man with Matthew's message he has almost wholly confined himself to existence in abasement here and existence in the eschatological judgment and in glory in the future. He has little consideration for the notion of salvation history with its unrolling of God's revelation via the channels of history, which demand that serious attention be paid to the claims of historicity of the Gospel accounts. To forgo these is, in the end, to forgo not only aspects of the Church but even the notion of the Church itself.

Hence the value of Trilling's study of St Matthew which has taken into consideration those lacunae found in Bornkamm's work. This study was originally conceived as a thesis (at the University of Munich) on 'The Theology of St Matthew's Gospel' and, during the research on this theme, the central importance of the Church consciousness and Church structure underlying this Gospel became more and more clear. Hence the title which was finally given to the work: 'The True Israel' with its notion of the people of God to the fore. The author bases his study (following the suggestion of O. Michel) on Matt. 28:16-20 and organises his material in the light of this text which shows

the foundation of the Church through the exaltation of Christ as Lord. However Trilling, despite his brilliant analysis and theological synthesis of the texts (making full use of the methods of form criticism and redactional investigations), seems to have overstated what he takes to be the attitude of the Judeo-Christian evangelist towards Israel. Was Matthew's presentation of the judgment of Israel and the constitution of the true (eschatological) Israel with its new torah so profoundly conditioned by controversy with the former chosen people? Such a polemical dialogue is not absent from Matthew but Matthew's appreciation of the Church does not stem from what Israel—or better, his contemporary Judaism—was not. In addition, moreover, to the question of the Church breaking away from the synagogue, there was the equally important issue of continuity between the people of God in the old dispensation and in the new.

The third author we have to note in this return to Matthaean theology is G. Strecker. It has to be admitted at once that he, like Bornkamm, though with a vast difference, has allowed his study to be governed by present existential perspectives (with an eye to the relevance of Matthew for moderns) where Trilling was led more by the existential directives of the apostolic Church (the exalted Lord standing behind the Church in her daily life)—a definitely more objective approach to the Gospel in which the Church records an understanding of herself.

Strecker's obvious enthusiasm for the opening afforded by Conzelmann's investigation of the significance of the historical in Luke seems to have been his departure point for a study of Matthew's theology. His work tries to define, however, not so much Matthew's understanding of the historical as to correlate the historical and the eschatological (a problem which reaches its acutest form in any examination of the Apocalypse and which has given rise to seven schools of interpretation). We may isolate two main trends in his work on Matthew: an attempt to see a process of 'historisation' in the accounts of Jesus and an effort to express the eschatological significance of the Church.

Strecker is of the opinion that in Matthew there is a process of 'historisation' in that, from fragmentary traditions assembled in a final edition, a *bios* (rather than, to avoid conventional overtones, a 'Life') of Jesus was formed, and with the passing of time this *bios* became a 'sacred past'—distinguishable both from the Old Testament and from the present time of the Church. This category of history for the 'time of Jesus' is permissible to allow such a triple distinction, but it must not be permitted to cloud the fact that the significance of Christ is primarily

eschatological. The eschatological, the historic (as contrasted with the historical) is 'historised', written up in terms of a line of events in a particular time. This, Strecker claims, dominated Matthew's editorial work and we must be aware of it in respect of Matthew's treatment of the Church.

Just as the eschatological significance of Christ is before all else, so, too, the sayings on the Church from the mouth of Jesus must be seen as primarily of eschatological import: he quotes Matt. 16:18 as indicating, not a factual establishing of Peter in office (denied also by Bornkamm), but a situation of the Church in struggle, in combat. It has a 'typological' meaning. Although Strecker employs some notions of salvation history—the Church, here and now, working out salvation under the shadow of the coming end—yet he does not deduce her various roles from concrete historical data of the 'time' of Jesus: was not this a mere 'historisation' of the eschatological? The sayings, then, on the Church are interpreted eschatologically—but so also are the facets of her present life. She is seen as a *corpus mixtum* (rather than as a chosen people of God) standing, with the world, under the Lordship of the exalted Jesus, account of which must be rendered at the judgment. Baptism and the Eucharist are viewed as obediential acts to that Lordship and ethics challenge the world and the Church exactly in the same way (the Sermon on the Mount does not differentiate between the call to Christian perfection and the demands of the moral law). The only difference between the Church and the world is that the Church, as community of the *Kyrios*, is the accredited and reliable representative of the Lord's directing of man to his final end.

Much of the criticism that can be levelled at Bornkamm is applicable also to Strecker—both have submitted to approaching their subject matter in a frame of mind that must prejudice their findings, colouring them with an existentialist exegesis that has little to do with the preoccupations of the primitive Church. On the other hand, we must view with approval their attempts to probe the basic thought of Matthew's theology and the newer methods of research utilised for this end. It is just unfortunate that in this search to make his message over to those of our time, that message has been recast to cover the areas of stress experienced today. Matthew can do that, but with much more depth and enrichment. Now that the flood-gates have been opened, further research, while using the works we have been looking at, should be able both to seek greater enlightenment on Matthew's all-embracing theme as well as evoke a sympathetic hearing among those of the post-Christian society.

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