

## Chapter 5

# Doctrine and the Witness of Faith

The witness of the Apostles, by means of which they were able to perform their “service of the Word”, is twofold in character: it is the *story* of Jesus, and it is the *teaching* about Jesus. This dual character of their witness is in harmony with the actual fact of revelation: that the “Word became flesh”. The revelation of God in Jesus Christ is not itself a doctrine, but a Person, with His story.

The fact that the first disciples *told* the story of Jesus was not a mistake, nor was it a deviation from the right path. It is not due to a misunderstanding that the stories of Jesus are called the “Four Gospels”. They are unique, for they contain the very heart of the Gospel. It was therefore an exaggeration—which had an unfortunate influence at the beginning of the theological renewal derived from Kierkegaard—when the great Danish thinker maintained that in order to become a Christian, in order to establish the Christian Faith, there was no longer any need of “narrative” or record; all that was required was to state that God became Man.<sup>1</sup> God’s Providence was more merciful: He gave us the Four Gospels. The stories of Jesus must have played a very great part in the primitive Christian *kerygma*, just as they do to-day in all healthy and fruitful missionary work. In contrast to the doctrinal activity of the non-Christian religions or philosophies, the Christian message is, first of all, narrative, not doctrine.

Through the story of Jesus in the Gospels we are ourselves confronted by Him. The fact that the Apostle, the missionary, must above all “tell a story”, and can only teach on the basis of this narrative, brings out very clearly the distinctive element in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. In other religions there are *doctrines* which claim to deal with a supposed “revelation”, but there is no *story* of revelation. To proclaim the Word of God means, in the New Testament, first of all to *tell the story* of Jesus, of His life and His teaching, of His sufferings, His death and His resurrection. So long as the Church is vitally aware of this, the idea of the “Word of God” is not in danger of being misunderstood in ultra-intellectual “orthodox” terms. Conversely, where doctrine is emphasized at the expense of the Biblical

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1. Kierkegaard, *Philos. Brocken*, pp. 94 ff.

narrative, there the intellectualistic misunderstanding of orthodoxy has already begun.

Reformation theology, if measured by this standard, cannot be wholly acquitted from the reproach of having confused the Word of God with doctrine; just as we cannot fail to be amazed at its one-sided doctrinal instruction, based on the Catechism, not only on didactic grounds, but also on those of theology.

The Reformers constantly maintained that the mere “story” of Jesus was of no use to faith; up to a point, of course, they were right, for in actual fact the *mere* story is as powerless to awaken faith as *mere* doctrine. It is essential to the witness to the Incarnate Son of God that the story of Jesus and the teaching about Jesus should be indissolubly united. Even the narrative as such cannot give us “Himself”. A “sound film” of the life of Jesus taken by a neutral reporter, or an account of the life of Jesus written by an unbelieving compiler—such as Josephus, for instance—would not have the power to awaken faith in Jesus. But the Gospel narratives of the New Testament are not neutral, for they do not give an “objective” account. They are not photographs but portraits; they are not merely narratives of something that happened, they are testimonies in the form of narrative. This result, which the New Testament research of our generation, in the sphere of criticism, has undoubtedly brought out very clearly, has not yet been fully integrated into theological thought: even the telling of a story may be a testimony to Christ, indeed this is the primary form of the primitive Christian witness. This fact is so significant because it shows very clearly that the essential Gospel, the “Word of God”, the revelation, is contained, not in the words spoken by the witness, but in that to which he bears witness.

Here the oft-repeated formula, that “witness” is the act of “pointing”, gains its clearest meaning. We cannot “point” away from ourselves to “the other” more clearly than by emphasizing the fact that the story we tell is itself the whole point of our message, that it is itself “the Gospel”. The story of Jesus makes it very plain that it is not what we say that matters, but Himself—so we must look away to Him, Himself. The story of Jesus with this absolute emphasis: He of Whom I tell you is the revelation of God—that is the meaning of all the Gospel narratives, and the form of the earliest witness to Jesus Christ.

It is certainly no accident, but is actually in the highest degree significant, that the Risen Lord Himself said: “Ye shall

be My witnesses”<sup>2</sup> Only when the “life of Jesus” is seen and narrated from that standpoint is it truly a witness, is it a “Gospel”, and not merely a series of “anecdotes about Jesus”.<sup>3</sup> It is the Jesus who proved Himself to be the Christ in the Resurrection, whose earthly life and words are to be narrated. The orientation towards this point, which alone makes the picture correct in the sense of testimony, is, however, only possible, and can therefore only then shape the narrative, of one whose eyes have been opened by the Holy Spirit, so that in the picture of the Crucified he is able to “behold” the “Glory of God, full of grace and truth”. Thus the Holy Spirit at the first “spoke” in the Apostles, so that they were able to see the picture of the earthly Jesus, of the Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth, as that of the Messiah and the Son of God. The picture of His earthly life came first; the fact that it gradually dawned on them that this was the picture of the Messiah was the first sign that the Holy Spirit was witnessing in their hearts. Accordingly, this is why the narrative of the acts and words of Jesus the Messiah was the first form in which they gave their own testimony. We ask: How did the Primitive Church carry on its missionary work? How did the Apostles carry out their calling as witnesses of Jesus? The standard answer to this question is not the *Corpus* of the Apostolic Epistles—they were written to communities which were already Christian—but the Gospel narratives. The “Gospels” represent the finest missionary preaching of the Apostolic period, of which otherwise we know so little.

Because the Word became *flesh*, the story of Jesus had to be told, and this story about Him is the primary witness;<sup>4</sup> but because the *Word* became flesh, alongside of the witness in story form, there had to be the witness in doctrinal form. In the narrative-witness the revelation is emphasized as the *Act* of God; in the witness in doctrinal form, the revelation is emphasized as the *Word* of God. Neither can be separated from the other; nor can they ultimately be distinguished from one another. For just as the story of Jesus, as the story of the Messiah Jesus, the Son of God, already contains “doctrine”, so the doctrine of Christ as the doctrine of the Incarnate, Crucified, and Risen Son of God, already contains the “story”. And yet the difference between the teaching of the Apostles and their

2. Acts 1: 8.

3. Cf. K. L. Schmidt, *Die Stellung der Evangelien in der allg. Literaturgeschichte*, Festschrift für H. Gunkel, 1923; and other works on *Formgeschichte*.

4. Cf. *Theol. Wörterbuch*, IV, p. 121.

Gospel narrative is obvious. It is the task of the doctrinal testimony to make the subject of these deeds and words, of this suffering and victory, visible, which is invisible in the narrative as such. While this is only suggested in the narrative of the Gospels, it comes out clearly in the doctrinal testimony. Just as the narrative moves deliberately, in order to show who He is, and what is His secret, within the sphere of time and space, so the doctrine develops gradually, within the sphere of thought, in order to make the meaning of the mystery clear.

If, however, we go back to the origin of both, to the point at which “it pleased God to reveal His Son in me”; that is, where the revelation becomes the *Word* of God, then we perceive that an important change has taken place between this point and the witness. Peter, who was the first to confess Jesus as the Christ, because this “was not revealed unto him by flesh and blood, but by the Father in heaven”, does not tell the story of Jesus, nor does he teach about Christ. His confession, the primitive form of his witness, is still accomplished in the dimension of personal encounter: “Truly Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God!” The original form of all genuine witness is the confession of faith in the form of the answering “Thou”, evoked by the “Thou”-word of God addressed to the soul. This is true not only of the confession of the Apostle, but also of the confession of every true believer, of that “Abba, Father”, which the Holy Spirit utters, evoking the response of faith in the same inspired words. The act of faith is a confession in the form of prayer, in the dimension “Thou-I”;<sup>5</sup> it is not a doctrinal statement in the third person: “He-you”.

Thus the first step in the development of the doctrinal testimony is to move away from the “Thou-relation” to God; this signifies a change of front: from God towards the world. In doctrine man speaks no longer in the “Thou”-form to God—as in the original confession of faith—but he now speaks *about* God as “He”. Doctrine is no longer a spontaneous, personal response, in the form of prayer, to the Word of God, but already, even in its simplest form, it is reflective speech *about* God. The process of leaving the sphere of personal encounter in order to enter into the impersonal sphere of reflection is the presupposition of all doctrine. God is now no longer the One who speaks, but the One who is spoken about. It is no longer God who is addressed, but a person, or a number of people. This change of dimension, this transition from the personal sphere into the

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5. Cf. *Offenbarung und Vevnunft*, pp. 119 ff.

impersonal, is the same as that of reflection. Hence all doctrine is reflective; but all doctrine does not represent a process of reflection to the same extent. The extent to which the personal relation is broken by the impersonal depends on the extent of reflection and also of the didactic element. The more that God becomes an *object* of instruction, instead of being One who is addressed with believing fervour, the *further* the doctrine moves away from the direct confession of faith, the more it becomes theoretical and doctrinal. It is an essential characteristic of the Biblical “doctrine”, and especially of that of the New Testament, that it contains a minimum of doctrinal reflection.<sup>6</sup> Doctrine (or teaching) continually passes into worship, thanksgiving and praise, into the immediacy of personal communion. This comes out very clearly in a second process of refraction in that which we describe as “doctrine”.

The witness of the Apostles, as a personal confession of faith, is always at the same time a call to obedience. The “Thou” has not disappeared: it has only changed its *vis-à-vis*. The Apostle who is both witness and teacher no longer addresses God, but he speaks in the Name of God to Man. “We beseech you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God.”<sup>7</sup> All apostolic teaching is speech which calls for faith and obedience, speech which tries to win others, which tries to bring others within the circle of those who believe. Even where the Apostle is giving direct “teaching”, what he says is more than a “lecture”. Even in this teaching, in spite of the fact that God is being “spoken about” the “Thou”-relation still determines the attitude of the speaker and the tendency of his message, because, and in so far as, the speaker addresses man in the Name of God: with the authority of a Divine commission, in absolute harmony with the God who reveals Himself to him. Thus such teaching, even where it takes place in the third person, for the sake of *this* “Thou”, is not really reflective. It is not what we usually mean by “doctrine”; it is *witness* which demands an answer.

This witness, which is also a summons to faith and obedience, already differs in a significant way from instruction, as, for instance, the instruction of catechumens for Baptism in the Early Church. It is true that here also the *faith* of the learners is the aim, but it is not the immediate aim. The change to the third person, to teaching-about-God, goes deeper than in the

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6. The very word “Teaching” or “doctrine” has a far less theoretical and academic meaning in the New Testament than it has to-day. Cf. article on *διδάσκειν* in the *Wörterbuch z. N.T.*, II, pp. 147 ff.

7. 2 Cor. 5: 20.

witness of faith; the extension into the dimension of the third person covers and includes a wider sphere, more time is given to a reflective, and rather more scholastic, form of teaching.

The teaching of the Catechism, with its questions and answers, is directed primarily to the intellect; the subject must be understood, and to this end it is explained. Here we no longer hear—or if we do, only from very far off—that urgent cry: “Be ye reconciled to God! Repent!” But the deflection of the pupil’s mind from the sphere of faith, of existence in the “Thou”- dimension by doctrinal teaching, is strictly limited to the explanation of that which is elementary and necessary. It is only the intellectual questions which clamour for consideration which lead to that theoretical extension which we call “theology” or “dogmatics”.

In this sphere reflection predominates: thought and prayer are separated, not, it is true, in principle, but in practice. The teacher may, of course, remain aware that the subject he is teaching is his confession of faith, and that the instruction of the pupil ultimately demands the obedience of faith; but this faith is a distant source and a distant goal. Between both there extends the broad space of mental reflection—and the further it extends the more does the unlikeness increase between the subject that is discussed, and Him whom we address in the response of prayer. The further dogmatics extends, the more remote is its relation to its Primal Source; the further it drifts away from the confession of faith as “being laid hold of” by God, the more is the personal relation with God replaced by an impersonal one.

The change which this makes in the confession of faith is so great, and the danger of drifting away completely from the Origin and from the Goal is so acute, that we must ask ourselves why, then, does this take place ? *Now* we understand all those objections—already mentioned—to the study of dogmatic theology; we must, therefore, repeat the question: Why does this change have to take place ? Why should it take place ? But we have not forgotten the answer which was given earlier: The transformation of the adoring confession of faith into a “doctrine-about-God” *must* take place—not for its own sake, not because faith itself requires it, but—for the sake of the believer, in face of doctrinal errors or heresies, in face of the questions which necessarily arise in our own minds, and in face of the difficulties which the original Biblical doctrine provides for the understanding.