God's Work in History: The Post-Biblical Epoch

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[This paper was presented at the Public Colloquium of the Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto, and Regent College, Vancouver, at York University, Toronto, 16 May 1975, and included in the *Association for the Advancement of Christian Scholarship Papers* (1975), 1-27]

The 'problem': discontinuity between biblical times and today

For Christians, one of the most striking discontinuities between the epoch of the Old and New Testaments and today must surely be that no Moses, no Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, or Habakkuk is alive among us having the authority to interpret God's will and words and to tell us how God reveals himself in the events of history. Jesus Christ does not walk the streets of Toronto or the hillsides of Lake Ontario to show us God's work. We have no Paul or John writing us letters to tell us what God is doing and what God wants us to do.

The people of biblical Israel may not have listened very well to Moses when he spoke God's law to them in ancient times, but have not we sometimes wished that we today could hear the revelation of God in history with the specificity of Moses addressing Israel prior to Israel's entry into Canaan?:

> You shall not charge interest on anything you lend to a fellow countryman, money or food or anything else on which interest can be charged. You may charge interest on a loan to a foreigner but not on a loan to a fellow countryman, for then the Lord your God will bless you in all you undertake in the land which you are entering to occupy (Deut.23:19-20)

We might wish we could hear an interpretation of historical events today having the authority of the message Habakkuk proclaimed to ancient Israel as the words of God himself:

> … there is work afoot in your days which you will not believe when it is told you. It is this: I am raising up the Chaldaeans that savage and impetuous nation, who cross the wide tracts of the earth to take possession of homes not theirs. (Hab. 1: 5-6).

Peter at Jerusalem explicitly interpreted the course of history concerning Jesus Christ:

> When [Christ] had been given up to you, by the deliberate will and plan of God, you used heathen men to crucify and kill him (Acts 2:22-24).

Christians at Corinth received explicit directions in a letter from Paul about what to do in their meetings together. Paul claimed: "...what I write has the Lord's authority" (1 Cor. l4: 37). They, like biblical Israel before them, may not have listened, but at least they had an opportunity and experience Christians today cannot have.

This discontinuity is affirmed by two claims consistently made by Christians throughout the history of the Christian tradition. First, the emissaries from God in the biblical epoch—Moses, the prophets, the apostles, and the others—were unique: their messages were authoritatively and authentically the words of God. Christians today have no such emissaries. Secondly, the events and deeds about which they spoke in God's name, such as the Exodus, the Babylonian captivity of Israel, and the incarnation of Christ, were similarly unique revelatory acts of God. There are no events having that status today.

To compound this discontinuity of revelation and authority is the cultural discontinuity between then and today. The historical setting of the twentieth century world is culturally as remote as can be from the ancient near eastern and Hellenic worlds of biblical times where the emissaries of God spoke their authoritative messages. There is no *historical* similarity between the city of New York and ancient Babylon, or between the Great Britain and ancient Israel. When we today read Moses, the prophets, and the apostles, we must always hear them via ancient cultures that are foreign to us today.

In spite of this, Christians of virtually all traditions have also repeatedly affirmed that God did not stop acting in history, and that God acts today. The assumption of continuity is basic, yet the reality of discontinuity is overwhelming.

Pannenberg, in a significant essay entitled "Hermeneutic and universal history," emphasizes the importance of the problems that the discontinuity between then and now raises. The difference between the texts and the events to which they point, he observes, is only one side of the problem of interpreting the biblical accounts. I agree with his judgment, "With respect to the distance between primitive Christianity and

our age, we have to do with the central problem of hermeneutic(s)."[1] In other words, we must raise this hermeneutic issue before we approach the larger question of God's work in history today.

My concerns, then, are two: (1) what points of continuity are there that bind our epoch today to the biblical epoch and allow us to affirm that Gods acts in history today? and (2) how we can know God's work and God's will in history today? I think of these concerns suggestively as a historian studying history, but any of us can feel their weight as people who want to know God's work in our lives.

Overcoming the discontinuity

Not many Christians today have remained satisfied with simply longing to be alive in biblical times. We have accepted our place in history, and so have sought ways to overcome the discontinuity between biblical and post-biblical times.

The solutions that Christians have tried have been many. Some people have found the answer in turning to new prophets or new scriptures. There is, for instance, a long medieval tradition of prophets who purported to tell the meaning of specific events and of future events. Examples are the Toledo letter and the Tripoli Prophecy, modelled on Daniel and Revelation. African prophets do this today. Mormons and Christian Scientists have new writings that they claim supplement the biblical writings and give further revelation.

Most Christians—and rightly so—have made the connection with biblical times by appealing in some way to the authority of the Scriptures of the Old Testament and New Testament for today and by claiming for today in some way the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit as given to the believers in Jerusalem at Pentecost (Luke 24: 44-49; Acts 1: 1-8; Acts 2: l-47).

Notoriously, however, there is a seemingly infinite variety of claims that Christians have made in the name of the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit. Roman Catholics,

[1] Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Hermeneutic and universal history," in *Basic questions in theology*, I (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 96-97. The essay was first published as "Hermeneutik und universalgeschichte; *Zeitschrift für theologie und kirche*, 60 (1963), 90-121.

Eastern Orthodox, and Anglicans have relied heavily upon the Holy Spirit working via the tradition of the Church, in the lives of the saints, in the sacraments, and in the apostolic succession of the bishops. Reformed and Lutheran churches have developed their own equivalent traditions as touchstone, such as the authority of Calvin and Luther, and the 'subordinate standards' of the major confessions of faith, such as the Belgic Confession, the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the Canons of Dordt. In more individualist traditions, many Christians have come to rely upon the leadership of 'great men of God,' or pious individuals, or the local church pastor. Others look to a new charismatic movement for a direct and personal revelation of the Holy Spirit today. Still others rely on the World Council of Churches to detect the acts of God in the Vietnam war or in the liberation movements in Africa. Many are the divisions within Protestantism caused by those who have claimed superior knowledge of God's will via the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit. When surveying the great variety of traditions that have developed to overcome the discontinuity between then and now, the words of Jesus recorded by Mark seem powerfully relevant: "You neglect the commandment of God, in order to maintain the tradition of men" (Mark 7:8). We must employ great care in claiming the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit on our behalf.

Pannenberg is correct when he says that the doctrine of the clarity of the Scriptures stressed by Luther is no longer sufficient by itself. We are too aware of the historical situatedness of the texts as well as ourselves, and we know too much about historical changes since the texts were composed. Christians, says Pannenberg, must be about the task of "building hermeneutic bridges from them [the Scriptures] to some present time."[2]

Pannenberg argues with equal conviction that the solution proposed by Bultmann is inadequate by itself as well. Bultmann believed that the appropriate "bridge" was "the simple fact that the presupposition for understanding is the interpreter's relationship in his life to the essential content which is directly or indirectly expressed in the text." Besides doing injustice to the character of history, Bultmann's existentialist solution, says Pannenberg, can only "regard the [Scriptures'] statements about God, the world,

[2] Pannenberg, 96-97.

and history as merely the *expression* of an underlying understanding of human existence."[3]

In historiography, there is a long tradition, running from St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) to Bishop Bossuet of France (1627-1704), and on into the nineteenth century, that sought to bridge the discontinuity by copying the model of the biblical writings, and interpreting history as the direct action of God, leading peoples to their place in history and giving blessing or judgment upon empires and human activity.

Augustine, in *The City of God*, interpreted the fall of Rome much as Jeremiah or Habakkuk interpreted ancient Israel's calamities. Rome was pillaged in 410 because of its own sins and God's judgment. If people had 'any right perceptions,' they ought, wrote Augustine,

> to attribute the severities and hardships inflicted by their enemies to that divine providence which is wont to reform the depraved manners of men by chastisement, and which exercises with similar afflictions the righteous and praiseworthy.[4]

Augustine continued:

> All the spoiling, then, which Rome was exposed to in the recent calamities—all the slaughter, plundering, burning, and misery—was the result of the custom of war.[5]

1250 years later Bossuet, in his *Discours sur l'histoire universelle* of 1681, quite agreed. Rome fell because of her violence, which Divine Providence judged in kind by means of the barbarian invaders.[6]

Indeed, in this tradition of historiography, part of the historian's task was taken to be to discern the ways of God among humankind and to identify the blessings and judgments of God upon the nations of the earth. Such historiography attempted in this sense to perpetuate the genre of writing of the Old Testament in particular.

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[3] Pannenberg, 107-110.
[4] Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), 4.
[5] Augustine, 9, l1
[6] Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, *Discours sur l'histoire universelle* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966), espcia1ly Part III, chap. 2, 7 and 8. Like Machiavelli, Bossuet intended his history to be an instruction to princes who should learn from history, in this case, not from Fate in history but from Providence in history.

In a similar way, there have been attempts to overcome the discontinuity by identifying the nation of biblical Israel with some body or people today, such as the institutional church or a particular nation. The Roman Catholic Church was the new Israel, the Puritans were the new Israel, true Evangelicals are the new Israel, America is the new Israel. Oliver Cromwell's language represented a long tradition of how the work of God with biblical Israel could be identified with one's own work and nation. In a speech to Parliament in l657, Cromwell claimed that the content of Psalm 85 could be applied to his own regime and military successes to date:

> The greatest demonstration of His favour and love appears to us in this: that he hath given us *Peace*, and the blessings of Peace; to wit, the enjoyment of our liberties civil and spiritual.... I truly hope this is His land! In some sense it may be given out that it *is* God's land. And he that hath the weakest knowledge, and the worst memory, can easily tell that we are 'a Reformed People,'—'from the time' when God was first pleased to look favourably upon us 'to redeem us out of the hands Popery', in that never to be forgotten Reformation, that most significant and greatest 'mercy' the Nation hath felt or tasted.[7]

Well known are the claims of God's special blessing upon England in the defeat of the 'papist ' Spanish Armada in 1588, and of God's blessing upon the Pilgrims in the death by famine of the 'savage' Indians the season before the Mayflower arrived. Such language has passed into the common Christian vocabulary as we hear claims that God has blessed this cause, or that building campaign, this business investment, or that great leader.

In historiography, it took the impact of the militant secularists from Machiavelli, Voltaire, and Gibbon to the nineteenth century positivists to demonstrate that the study of history is a study of *people*, not of God. Historians have a difficult enough task discerning the ways of people, and they should quit trying to discern the ways of God.

C. S. Lewis has written a criticism of all attempts to discern the finger of God in history by intellectual devices alone, an undertaking that he calls "historicism":

> If by one miracle, the total content of time were spread out before me, and if, by another, I were able to hold all that infinity of events in my mind, and if, by a third, God were pleased to comment on it so that I could understand it, then,

[7] Oliver Cromwell, Speech to House of Commons, 20 Jan. 1657, in *Oliver Cromwell's letters and speeches with elucidations by Thomas Carlyle*, III (London: J. M. Dent, n.d.), 297-298.

> to be sure I could do what the Historicist says he is doing. I could read the meaning, discern the pattern. Yes; and if the sky fell we should all catch larks.[8]

We must admit it is true, as Marrou says, that the complexity of historical events is so great, that the evidence of the events available to us so incomplete, and that a knowledge of the future is so unattainable that we cannot hope for more than the most limited worth to be attached to our attempts to interpret the ways of God in history today.[9]

It would be easy to despair and say that we simply cannot know the ways of God in any important sense today. And many there are who have given up on God acting in history today. It is partly because of the plethora of conflicting claims about God's work that so many of us in our ordinary affairs have ceased to live as if God's Providence has to do with us today at all. But such a course would not be faithful to what Moses, the prophets, Jesus Christ, and the apostles themselves evidently intended for their own witness of God's work in the world.

The continuities

It is my thesis that there are at least four interdependent ties of continuity between biblical times and the post-biblical epoch, all centred on Jesus Christ, that provide a basis for affirming that God acts today and for discerning what his work is in the world, however much his work remains in crucial respects a mystery we cannot know. Pannenberg identifies one continuity, while Bultmann probably refers to another.

1. There is truth underlying all the conflicting and distorted claims made about the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit. And herein lies the first continuity. John states it in a passage that all interpreters rightly take as pivotal. It was the time of the last supper of disciples with Jesus in Jerusalem when Jesus tried to explain that he would soon have to go away to a place where they could not follow:

> Judas asked him—the other Judas, not Iscariot—"Lord, what can have happened, that you mean to disclose yourself to us alone and not to the world?" Jesus replied, "Anyone who loves me will heed what I say; then my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with

[8] C. S. Lewis, "Historicism," in *The Month*, n.s., IV (1950), 234.
[9] Henri-Irénée Marrou, *Time and timeliness* (New York: Sheed and Ward, l969).

> him; but he who does not love me does not heed what I say. And the word you hear is not mine: it is the word of the Father who sent me. I have told you all this while I am still here with you; but your Advocate, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and will call to mind all that I have told you." (John 14:22-26)

What Jesus reveals is a mystery, yet he tells us what we need to know: Jesus leaves Jerusalem, but he remains—to live with us. The Father is in heaven, but he is near—within us. The Holy Spirit, our Advocate, will come—to be with us. All those who love God will do what Jesus Christ says. The Holy Spirit will react upon Christ's words in our lives. The point to identify now is that our knowledge of the words and person of Jesus comes through the Gospels. And, as Jesus explained to the two people in the road leading to Emmaus, Moses and the Psalms and all the prophets speak of him as well (Luke 24). The apostles' writings make the same claim about their writings (cf. Cor. l; Gal. l; 1 John 1; etc.).

For us who live in post-biblical times, it is the Scriptures—the writings of the Old and New Testaments—that are the authority by which we may affirm that God works today as well as then. Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will open the Scriptures to us for our understanding. It remains, of course, for us to learn what it means for the Scriptures, with all their culture-situatedness, to be our authority, but we at least may begin with the certainty that they are, and then we may speak of other 'bridges,' or continuities, from then to now.

2. A second continuity is the Ekklesia—the community of Jesus Christ, the new Israel—as the spiritual continuation of the biblical Israel. The People of God of the biblical Israel and the Ekklesia are one people. This we may experience today, both as a community and personally. If the Scriptures are the authority for today, it is the People of God whose lives are activated by Christ's words through the Scriptures and by the Holy Spirit. When Moses speaks to the people of Israel he also speaks over their shoulders to us who stand behind them in the course of history. When Jesus speaks to the disciples, as John tells us, he speaks over their shoulders to us as well. And so with the prophets and the apostles.

Certainly there are important differences, some of which I have already suggested. The new Israel cannot be regarded as synonymous with any ethnic or national people,

nor with any mere part of the Christian people; and the situations and acts of biblical Israel, of Jesus Christ, and of the early Ekklesia were unique and cannot be reduplicated. Yet we who are part of the Ekklesia make up the People of God in direct and continuous lineage with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the words addressed to them are, *mutatis mutandis*, addressed to us. It is as Paul says:

> Those words were written, not for Abraham's sake alone, but for our sake too: it is to be 'counted' in the same way to us who have faith in the God who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead .... (Rom.4:23-24)

Our lives share spiritual unity with those to whom the prophets and apostles spoke, so that the message to them comes alive in us today. Moreover, we may affirm that there is no indication that God ceased acting in history after the biblical period, since by faith we experience that he continues to act today. This is the truth in Bultmann's 'bridge': "the interpreter's relationship in his life to the essential content which is directly or indirectly expressed in the text."[10]

3. A third point of continuity is summarized in the words of Jesus to the disciples at the time of the last supper: "I am going away, and coming back to you" (John l4:28). In those words is contained an epoch. The epoch is our own. Our time is part of what Marrou terms "the triptych of history."[11] Jesus Christ's life and work is the central panel. The covenant before Jesus is the first. The third panel begins with the resurrection and departure of Jesus and continues until he returns to complete the three part scene. In other words, then and now form one history, centred on Jesus Christ; people then and now form one historical humanity.

The Christian understanding of history is comprehensive. The Scriptures of the first covenant disclosed the origins of the whole creation and the purpose of God in history. They revealed the meaning of sin and linked the responsibility for sin with humankind. And they told of the gathering of a redeemed people, as God's way with biblical Israel moved toward Jesus Christ. Then came Jesus Christ—God with us, God incarnate. He is the redeemer, the one who annihilates sin and death. Jesus began to gather his new People—the Body of Christ, the Ekklesia—and instructed his apostles in the faith. The Scriptures of the new covenant do not stop with the apostles

[10] Bultmann, quoted in Pannenberg, 108.
[11] Marrou, passim.

and the first Ekklesia, but they turn toward the eschaton when Jesus Christ, as he told the disciples, will come back again. We live between Jesus Christ's resurrection and his second coming at the end of human history. Then shall all evil be banished as the New Heavens and the New Earth appear with Jesus Christ as Lord. Then the whole creation shall do his will perfectly.

Such is the biblical picture of the whole human drama, as Butterfield calls it.[12] We today live on the third panel of the triptych, and we are embraced by the revelation given in the biblical epoch. The biblical writings do not merely tell about the period of time from about 1800 B.C. to about 100 A.D. They speak of all history, from origins to eschaton. Moreover, they relate not only to the ancient near east and the Mediterranean region, but to all peoples in history belonging to all cultures.

It is to this point that Pannenberg refers when he urges that the hermeneutic 'bridge' is formed by universal history. He writes quite correctly:

> the event sought in inquiring behind the texts does not manifest itself for what it really is when taken as an isolated fact, but does so only within universal continuities of events and meanings, i.e., only within the horizon of universal history, which, incidentally, also embraces the present era of the investigator.[13]

This continuity is realized on two dimensions. On one dimension, there is the whole human drama seen in one vision of creation, fall, and redemption, and played in the theatre of history from origins to eschaton. On the other, there are the detailed historical lines of formation and development that historians study and that relate one culture and period to the next. Rome and Parthia interacted upon the ancient near eastern and Hellenic worlds; the *corpus Christianum* of the medieval European period interacted upon the Roman; the Islamic world interacted upon the Sassanid; and so on until our own day. The first dimension is the key to understanding the meaning of the second, for they are the same historical reality.

4. A fourth continuity makes the other continuities possible: God's creation is, with Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever. What God has created and, through Jesus Christ, is recreating into the New Heavens and the New Earth, is and always will be the very condition of our life, our culture, and human history. It is

[12] Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and history* (London: Bell, 1949), chapter 1.

because of the constant structure of God's created reality that we may experience regularities and continuities in human history. For this reason, we may make comparisons between different cultures and cross-culturally, and do so over time: compare social structures, compare events, and compare human experiences. Because of this, it is possible for God to speak to us via the idiom of the ancient near east and Rome, and for us to hear God in Toronto, Bangkok, Papua, Tanzania, Cuzco, and Sicily. The biblical revelation spoken to particular peoples and times speaks simultaneously to universal experiences and created characteristics of all human life and cultures.

Let me illustrate. Cultivating the earth in ancient Palestine displays basic similarities with cultivation in modern Asia and North America, in spite of differences in dress, tools, and crops. Eating a meal in Jerusalem in Jesus' time, in spite of cultural differences, belongs to the same type of human act as eating a meal today. Slavery in Egypt is similar, with all its differences, to slavery in Rome, Brazil, and Alabama. We can recognize a catastrophe in Babylon as well as in Shanghai. Love between a man and a woman we can detect underneath the veil of cultural difference. Kindness and mutual care between people are the same yesterday and today, although the mode and context of showing them change. Political rulers of old Egypt and new Europe, in spite of radical cultural differences, share similar types of relationships to public order and justice. A crowd of hungry people needing to be fed in Galilee is not unlike a hungry crowd of refugees today. All who are parents know what it is to nurture children, today or in ancient Rome.

It is because of the continuity provided by God's creation that God's words in the Scriptures may penetrate the variety and complexity of human cultures. We have no trouble hearing 1 John 2: 9-11 across all those centuries because we know in God's creation what light is and darkness, what hate is and love:

> A person may say, "I am in the light"; but if he hates his brother, he is still in the dark. Only the man who loves his brother dwells in light: there is nothing to make him stumble. But one who hates his brother is in darkness; he walks in the dark and has no idea where he is going, because the darkness has made him blind.

[13] Pannenberg, 98.

Underneath the striking cultural and historical differences, that must be understood, lie the constancies of sin, redemption, human needs, societal life, human aspirations, the rocks, the earth, the plants, and the animals.

The point here is not one of historical continuity. We know what a catastrophe is not because of a direct or indirect line of education or influence or example from the ancient world to today, but because of the abiding structure of God's creation that we all experience in ways indigenous to our lives and cultures, whether we are ancients or moderns. The experience of love is revealed to Babylonians and Australians, not by historical linkage, but by the very make-up of reality. The structure of creation is itself a revelation of God's will.

Moreover, even though cultures change and whole new cultural forms have emerged since biblical times, the continuity of created reality still holds. While there was no General Motors Corporation in ancient Israel, there was then, as in General Motors, the need for stewardship and care of the resources of the earth, the need to see meaning in work, the need to organize production, the need to relate production to the rest of life, the reality of the poor, and so on. The cultural forms change, but the ability to recognize bad stewardship and blatant disregard of the poor existed then as well as now, precisely because of the abiding structure of God's created reality.

On the basis of these four continuities, centred on Jesus Christ, we may affirm that God in his Providence acts in history today as he did in biblical times. (1) What the Scriptures, opened by the Holy Spirit, say about God's acting then, *mutatis mutandis,* holds for today. (2) The People of God continue today in the Ekklesia, through whom and for whom God acts in special ways, now as well as then. (3) The whole human drama of history in which God acted then continues today and tomorrow, for as long as there are tomorrows. (4) The structure of created reality provides the primary condition of our lives as well as the ground of God's acting today as in biblical times.

God's work in history today

While we acknowledge the uniqueness of God's acting in the life of ancient Israel and the early Ekklesia during the biblical epoch, it remains our constant task to discern how God acts today in the uniqueness of our lives and cultures. .

Butterfield is right about how crucial it is for us to recognize that God acts today:

> ... if God cannot play a part in life, that is to say, in history, then neither can human beings have very much concern about him or very real relationships with him. Nothing is more important for the cause of religion at the present day than that we should recover the sense and consciousness of the Providence of God—a Providence that acts not merely by a species of remote control but as a living thing, operating in all the details of life—working at every moment, visible in every event. Without this you cannot have any serious religion, any real walking with God, any genuine prayer, any authentic fervour and faith.[14]

We may affirm that God who created the cosmos, history, and us, today, as then, lives, acts, and maintains his creation with devoted care, *providing for* his creatures within the whole course of history according to their needs, be they rocks, plants, animals, or ourselves. Now, as then, God guides us, blesses us, corrects us, and judges us, according to his will for our well-being. It is this meaning of Providence rather than the scholastic idea of pre-determination of the human will in human events that more faithfully corresponds with Paul's message to the Athenians (Acts 17:22-28). God provides for all humanity throughout all history, even as today he is near to us,. We may rely upon God to care for us and our children until the eschaton.

Working with the four continuities before us, we may ask: what can we now know of God's work?

We are assured in the Scriptures that we shall not now know completely the ways and work of God. We are not God. We cannot see the end from the beginning. We cannot even unravel the complexities of our own lives, let alone the lives of all who have lived in the course of human history.

It is, no doubt, due both to our finiteness and our sin that we now know so little. Only in the New Heavens and the New Earth will our knowledge of history be something

[14] Butterfield, "God in history," in *Steps to Christian understanding*, ed. R. J. W. Bean (New York: Oxford, l958), 105-106.

like God's is now (1 Cor. 13: 8-12). Our sin distorts even our best intentions so that the things we do often turn out as caricatures of our plans. As finite, we cannot control our lives by our own decisions alone, but we are, as Butterfield so well demonstrates, interconnected and interrelated with all kinds of people, institutions, and forces that take the *total* control of our lives out of our own hands.[15] We need only recall what international economic near-depression does to church and family budgets, beyond our best stewardly provisions. So much of human affairs is now mystery.

Because of the difficulties of discerning the ways of God, especially in our age, there have been many attempts by theologians to isolate a sacred history, in which God acts, from a profane history, in which ordinary life occurs. Some have tried to identify the history of salvation with church history and separate it from political, economic, and social histories. Early Barth, in reaction to the rationalist naturalism of theological liberalism, stressed the supernatural character of God's work in history. Bultmann, because of an existentialist view of history, theorized about a disparity between Christ, with whom we are contemporaries today by faith, now in the present, and Jesus of Nazareth, about whom we may know so little as a historical figure.[16]

Whatever their intentions, it seems that advocates of such positions tend tacitly *in their theories* to render God's work in history irrelevant to the wholeness of life as we ordinarily live it.

However, the Scriptures constantly push us other ways. The Scriptures assure us that, in spite of how imperfectly we know God now, we *can* know the will of God, and indeed we are told we should *do* the will of God in our lives (1 John 2 and 3). The message of the Scriptures insists again and again that God works his way in the world *by means of* his creatures: by means of the lives of human beings as the stewards of creation, but also through the stars, the rocks, the growth of plants in the earth, and the animals. Sin and salvation are experienced in creaturely acts.

[15] cf. Butterfield, *Christianity and history*, esp. chapter 5; and *Whig interpretation of history* (London: Bell, 1931).

We are brought to the realization that God's work of caring for his creatures by his Providence, saving us from evil and our distorted living, and overcoming disintegration in the world occurs as an integral feature of the ordinary course of our lives and of our cultures. Seen in this way, salvation history is the history of God's work of redeeming human beings and the whole creation in and through the ordinary course of history moving toward the eschaton. Similarly, profane history is the history of disintegration, the history of corruption, the history of distortion, in and through the same ordinary course of history moving toward the eschaton. In other words, there is the history of shalom in the world and the history of corruption in the world, and they interplay mysteriously, yet unmistakably. The point is that history as we know and experience it daily, and as historians study it, is itself the very medium of the interplay of sin and redemption as the third panel of the triptych of human history is gradually completed.[17]

This understanding of the *radical ordinariness* of salvation history surely does not obliterate the mystery of the ways of God in history. For one thing, as we all know in our lives, sin and redemption cut right through the middle of our own redeemed hearts. Sin does not reside only with 'the other side.' Sin and salvation seem to intermingle. The ambiguity of human action remains in spite of the best intentions of the members of the Ekklesia. Paul writes, "The good that I want to do, I fail to do; but what I actually do is the wrong which I really don't want to do" (Rom.7:19). For that matter, how often it is that shalom in life comes via the activity of professedly non-Christian people, often against the opposition of Christians.

What this understanding of the radical ordinariness of salvation history does is to bring near to us the history of biblical Israel, of Jesus Christ, and of the early Ekklesia about which the Scriptures speak, while confirming our integrality with history and the rest of humanity. The people of ancient Israel and the believers at Jerusalem or Corinth were ordinary people, just like you and me. They loved, they ate, they slept, they fought, they tilled the soil, they produced clothing and vehicles, they bore

[16] Bultmann, *The presence of eternity: history and eschatology* (New York: Harper and Row, l957), chapter 10.
[17] My point here is somewhat similar to Pannenberg's in *Revelation as history*, trans. David Granskow (New York: Macmillan, l968), although his focus is upon *revelation* more specifically, whereas mine is upon the work of God as an integral *dimension* of the whole course of ordinary history.

children, they knew tragedy, they knew great hopes. Jesus Christ, too, was a person like us.

The incredible reality of the incarnation is that Jesus really was born in a cow shed, he did learn a carpenter's trade in Nazareth, he did get hungry, give speeches, and travel. He knew about Augustus Caesar and corrupt politicians and tax collectors. Even his unusual experiences and deeds took place in the ordinary course of human events. He healed the lame, gave sight to the blind, turned water to wine, died and got up out of the grave—and he did these wonderful things in the Roman Empire, in Judea, in Jerusalem around 30 A.D. as we reckon time.

In short, God's work in history, today as in biblical times, takes place in the course of ordinary history and of the lives of ordinary human beings. All history is sacred, and as long as sin endures, all history is profane.

If this is so, then surely we should be able to tell what is God's work and what is not God's work. Yes and no. No, because of the mystery that remains, already referred to. But in a very real sense, yes, as well.

Let me illustrate by referring to only one dimension of God's work—his blessing and judgment in history. I think there is a norm whereby we may discern in a limited, non-ultimate way God's blessing and God's judgment in history: blessing comes where the commandments of God are *done* and hence where shalom is present; and judgment comes where the commandments of God are *not done*, and hence where distortion is present (cf. John l4 and 1 John 2; Deut. 27-28). The notion owes much to Augustine. Christopher Dawson puts the point this way:

> Wherever the power of divine love moves the human will, there the City of God is being built.[18]

And that is not only among the people of the Ekklesia.

It is a question of norms. This is part of the meaning of Moses' address to Israel before entering Canaan when he laid out the commandments whose observance would

[18] Christopher Dawson, "The Christian view of history," in *The dynamics of world history*, ed. John J. Mulloy (New York: Mentor Omega, 1962), 238.

yield blessing and whose non-observance would yield judgment (Deut.27-28). As Christians, we may affirm that it is God's will for us to follow the norms of justice, peace, mercy, kindness, long-suffering, joy, stewardship, promise-keeping, knowledge, clarity, nutrition, bodily health, psychical health, proper growth, blossoming and fruit-bearing, and much more (e.g. Gal.5:22-25 and Col.3:12-17). Jesus summarizes these norms with two great commandments: love God and love your neighbour as yourself (Mark 12: 28-31; Matt. 22: 35-40). We are to *do* these commandments. This is the Gospel law. Where these norms are lived, there is God's blessing and God's kingdom is coming. Where they are not, there is God's judgment and the kingdom has not yet come. These norms are not impossible ideals, but the means by which we may orient and direct our lives in salvific ways. The living of these norms brings in itself the blessing of a whole and healthy experience of God's world. The disobedience of these norms brings in itself the judgment of distortion, disintegration, and decay. Where shalom is now in human history, it will be taken into the New Earth, purified of all distortion. Our work lives forever when it brings shalom now.

God's blessing falls upon those of the Ekklesia as well as those not of the Ekklesia. The Ekklesia, however, has a special task to mediate God's blessing in the world. Christians *ought* to know what is good and *ought* to lead the way toward recognizing the healthy life and living it. The biblical images are many. We are the salt of the earth, the light set on a hill that cannot be hid, the leaven that leavens the whole lump of dough, the peace-makers, the representatives of Christ, the Body of Christ in the world. Marrou states my point well:

> What do we mean when we speak of "working for the coming of the Kingdom," of "building the City of God"? It simply means that each one of us has to endeavor, constantly, to obey the Gospel law more perfectly And the Gospel law is the law that has adopted the tradition handed down from the Old Testament in order to bring it to perfection, summing it up in the double injunction: to love God and to love our neighbor.[19]

Marrou gives an example which elucidates his—and my—meaning:

> Any genuinely healthy political action must necessarily involve the attempt to promote a situation of less injustice and greater peace amongst men, in which unity gains the upper hand over divisiveness, order over arbitrariness; in which egoism gives way to the common good; in which suffering becomes less and

[19] Marrou, 120.

> happiness greater …. We are bound to recognize in such an effort to promote a little more justice—which will always necessarily be only human justice, imperfect and limited—a reflection of uncreated justice which is both a divine attribute and an absolute value.[20]

This criterion of *normative health* enables us to discern the work of God as blessing. We may look for normative health in the life of a people, of an institution, of a friendship, of an industry, of a person. It helps us recognize God's blessing in this limited sense in the everyday course of our lives, within the radical ordinariness of salvation history. Christians and all people of good will must search together to learn the meaning of norms such as justice and stewardship for concrete historical situations. The starting point for Christians ought to be the awareness that there are such norms as understood in the light of the Scriptures, through the Holy Spirit, within God's created reality.

I might suggest that the criterion of normative health can serve historians in their quest to understand the character of events. Here description and judgment are joined on a non-ultimate level. Historians study human acts and events, all of which come under the authority of norms such as justice, peace, good will, stewardship, and the rest. In order to describe human action we are forced to judge where such norms are observed, however imperfectly, and where they are not. We need not say in our history books, 'This is God's blessing.' It is enough to say, 'Here justice was done,' or 'here love was present,' or 'here was physical health.'

The problem remains, of course, that human history is ambiguous, and sin and redemption are always intertwined. Moreover, Christians and other people of good will constantly disagree about what constitutes justice or peace or promise-keeping or stewardship in a given cultural setting. Furthermore, mockery is made of the norms when Christians flagrantly violate them and then claim God's blessing for the outcome. Cromwell's speech of 1657 cited earlier may be such a case (cf. James 4: l3-5:6).

Christians are enjoined, nonetheless, to pursue normative health and to work out the meaning of the norms in the light of Jesus Christ. Christians may seek normative

[20] Marrou, 122. Marrou's platonic capital letter Justice is an unsatisfactory notion, but the point is clear nonetheless.

health as the People of God, within the experience of God's creation, in view of the eschaton, and under the guidance of the Scriptures as the Holy Spirit makes them known. Christians may rely on the continuities between the biblical epoch and today, and know the reality of God's work in ordinary history today, as well as yesterday and tomorrow.