

How significant an achievement Bultmann's hermeneutics is becomes apparent when one compares it with Luther's principles of exegesis.

Both theologians make a distinction between two essential components of scriptural interpretation: (1) grammatical interpretation, or interpretation in accordance with the hermeneutical rules and historical-critical research; and (2) experience (or inspiration), or existentialist interpretation. Accordingly, Bultmann is in entire agreement with Luther that the scriptural interpreter must indeed depend upon the first of these components, but dare not depend upon it alone. As Luther puts it, "Languages in themselves do not make a theologian: they are only a help. Before a man can speak on anything, he must first know and understand the subject (*die Sache*)"(WA, TR, 1, no. 1040 [524.38]; quoted by B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Reason*: 147).

For Luther, however, the knowledge of the subject(-matter) (= *cognitio rerum*) that interpretation requires is, finally, his own "evangelical experience" and the doctrine of justification by grace/faith alone in which that experience finds expression. Thus he can say, "Not Scripture only . . . but also experience . . . . Therefore, together with the Scripture I have the matter (*rem*) and experience" (TR, 1, no. 701; 148). But, then, while Luther's interpretation of scripture can be interpreted as a case of *fides quaerens intellectum*—of the believer searching the text for further illumination of his own decisive experience—it can also be interpreted as a case of presupposing the results of exegesis before engaging in it, or, in other words, as in reality eisegesis. This, clearly, is exactly how Bultmann would have to interpret it, given the position he argues for in "Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?"

And yet Bultmann would certainly recognize the legitimate motive in Luther's position. He, too, holds that the task of translating the New Testament "is not merely philological-historical but also theological. . . . This is so because the philological-historical interpretation of any historical document . . . presupposes a relation between the interpreter and the particular subject matter that is involved. Just as only a mathematician can explain a document of ancient mathematics, and a musician or musical

person a document in the history of music, so only a philosopher can appropriately interpret Plato, and only a scholar moved by the question of faith can interpret the New Testament" (*NTM*: 59). But, significantly, Bultmann does not say—as the whole momentum of the sentence would lead one to expect!—that only a believer, or a believing scholar, can interpret the New Testament. He distinguishes, rather, between being a believer and being moved by the *question* to which the believer gives a particular answer. He also makes clear elsewhere that the whole idea that the exegete must be a believer is "all nonsense" and argues—in explicit contradiction to Luther's claim that exegesis presupposes "the light of grace/faith"—that "exegesis presupposes [only] the *lumen naturale*" (*EF*: 101).

At the same time, however, Bultmann's insistence that understanding a text necessarily presupposes a life relation to, and thus a preunderstanding of, the subject matter of the text saves all that is legitimate in Luther's position. There is no understanding of scripture, any more than of any other text, without "experience" and "the matter"—in the sense of enough experience of what the text is about to be able to ask the question to which the text addresses an answer. But Bultmann also shows that more than this, in the sense in which Luther understands these words, which is to say, believing acceptance of this answer, not only is not necessary to understanding scripture, but in fact stands in the way of it. It is not an application of the principle, *scriptura sui ipsius interpret*, but, rather, a transgression of this principle, insofar as the understanding of scripture is governed and determined by another authority.

The other great merit of Bultmann's hermeneutics, of course, is that it demonstrates that what is true of scriptural interpretation must be true of any other interpretation of the same logical kind—and vice versa.

2 May 1994