

As I understand Luther's christological reflections, there is a distinction to be made between *res* or *factum*, on the one hand, and the *usus rei* or *usus facti*, on the other.

Corresponding, then, to the *usus rei* or *usus facti* is the *vis rei* or *vis facti*. In other words, there is a power in the fact of Christ if, and only if, it is used—used, namely, by faith. Faith so uses the fact of Christ as to appropriate its power; or, alternatively, the power of the fact of Christ is appropriated by faith's use of the fact.

Question: what, exactly, is the relation between Luther's concept-term, "the *power* [*vis*] of the fact," and Bultmann's concept-term, "the *significance* [*die Bedeutung*] of the empirical-historical event"? It seems possible that they could be simply two ways of thinking-speaking about the same thing. On the other hand, recognizing (1) that, for Luther, "the *power* of the fact" seems to be strictly correlated with "the *use* of the fact" by faith; and (2) that, for Bultmann, *understanding* the existential significance of the empirical-historical event is one thing, whereas *faith* in the sense of positively appropriating that significance for oneself is something else—recognizing this difference, one may well feel the need for a more nuanced answer.

If I'm right that faith in decisive revelation actually involves a "double taking," i.e., (1) a taking of the fact of Jesus as re-presenting a certain possibility of self-understanding; and then (2) a taking of this possibility to be our authentic possibility by actually understanding oneself accordingly, then we may prefer to say that, whereas "significance" properly refers to the result of the first taking, "power" properly designates the result only of the second.

n.d.; rev. 8 September 2003

According to Gogarten, when Luther speaks of the *usus facti*, as distinct from the *factum*, he has two things in mind: first, the intention with which the *factum* is done; and second, the acceptance of the *factum* that corresponds to this intention, which is possible only as faith. The intention, in turn, is to be found nowhere else than in the word, without which such an occurrence never occurs; and the appropriation of the occurrence takes place in the faith in the word with which a human being answers to the intention (*Luthers Theologie*: 77).

I frankly question whether "intention" is the best way to render the sense of Luther's *usus*, as well as, possibly, Gogarten's own *die Absicht = die Intention*. It would be better to speak, I suspect, of the "end" or "purpose," or, perhaps even, the "point," of the *factum*.

But be this as it may, Gogarten's interpretation is helpful in bringing out the relation of the word, or proclamation, to the *factum* along with that of faith. Indeed, the *usus facti* is made clear solely by the word, even as it is faith alone that uses the *factum* in accordance with the end or purpose that the word makes clear, thereby answering to the word.

This seems to agree closely with Luther's frequent statement that it is the word that is "added" to the *factum* and makes it understandable as the salvation occurrence by demanding faith (cf. Bultmann, *NTM*: 40, 119. It also calls to mind Bultmann's own way of interpreting the word of God as "sober proclamation of the person and destiny of Jesus of Nazareth in their significance as history of salvation." "In the significance that belongs to it, the historical event of the cross has created a new historical situation; the proclamation of the cross as the salvation event asks its hearers whether they are willing to appropriate this meaning, whether they are willing to be crucified with Christ" [41, 35 f.]).

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Luther's distinction between the *res* or *factum*, on the one hand, and the *usus rei* or *usus facti*, as well as the *vis rei* or *vis facti*, on the other, is evidently a particular application of the scholastic distinction between material object and formal object. Its value is to make clear that the object side of the Christian revelatory correlation is not merely the thing or fact of Jesus, i.e., what I call "the Jesus of history as a fact of the past," but this thing or fact *experienced and understood in a certain way*, i.e., in my terms, as "the *existential-historical* Jesus," as distinct from "the *empirical-historical* Jesus."

Allowing, then, that the christology of witness in all its formulations, implicit as well as explicit, properly has to do with the thing or fact of Jesus, but only as used in this way, one may say that the "power" it functions to attribute to Jesus is the power, or "significance," he has if, and only if, he is so used. Thus, just as the christology of witness indicates how Jesus is to be used in order to have this power—namely, existentially (in its formal aspect) and as God's liberating judgment of the world and thus also of me myself (in its material aspect)—so the faith that responds to this christology of witness by obediently accepting it uses Jesus accordingly, thereby releasing this very power.

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My discussion of Luther's distinction between *fides historica* and *fides apprehensiva* (Notebooks, 14 September 1974; rev. 8 September 2003) would have been helped significantly, I think, had I been more clearly and consistently aware not only of my distinction between "assertions" and "assumptions," but also of the other distinction I've only gradually learned to make more carefully between "assertions" and "presuppositions."

It is one question whether or not assertions made on the basis of *fides apprehensiva* could be true, even while *assumptions* made on the basis of *fides historica* were false. But it is another, and different, question whether or not assertions made on the basis of *fides apprehensiva* could be true, even though *presuppositions* necessarily made in making them, and also any other assertions, or kinds of assertions, about the same subject, were false. The christological assertion about Jesus, as much as any other assertion or assumption about him, evidently presupposes that its subject term is the proper name of an individual in the past about whom, as about any historical figure, this as well as presumably other assertions, and other kinds of assertions, can be meaningfully and truly (if also falsely) made. But, then, the truth of the presupposition that the proper name "Jesus" functions to pick out just such an individual is clearly a necessary condition of the possibility of the christological assertion itself being true—or, for that matter, even being meaningful. Were there no historical figure that its subject term succeeds in picking out, the christological assertion could no more be true, or even meaningful, than any other assertion about Jesus of whatever kind, such as that he was a male human being, ethnically and religiously a Jew, the son of one Joseph of Nazareth, a rabbi among rabbis, an apocalyptic prophet once affiliated with John the Baptist, then the head of a messianic movement of his own, summarily executed by the Romans, and so on.

On the other hand, all such assertions of a clearly *empirical*-historical kind could be either true or false without in any way affecting the truth or falsity of the christological assertion, which being of a different logical kind—specifically, an *existential*-historical kind—has a correspondingly different kind of truth conditions. And this is so even in the case of formulations of the christological

assertion that are expressed inappropriately in terms that, logically considered, can only be classified as *empirical*-historical, rather than existential-historical—which, of course, is exactly the defining characteristic of any properly mythical, or mythological, formulation. Although the meaning of any such formulation is existential, or existential-historical, the terms in which its meaning is expressed are—again, logically considered, by reference to their "deep structure," as distinct from their "surface meaning"—empirical, or empirical-historical, terms.

Because this is so, however, something like Luther's distinction between *fides historica* and *fides apprehensiva* may very well be said to be the sufficient as well as the necessary condition of distinguishing, as I do, between what may be *assumed* to be true empirical-historically in thinking and speaking about Jesus and what is *asserted* about him existential-historically in making or implying the constitutive christological assertion. Indeed, it is just my distinction that explains why Luther can say—rightly!—that *fides historica* is of "no help *at all*"—namely, because its truth or falsity is completely independent, logically, of the truth asserted on the basis of *fides apprehensiva*. On the other hand, we may be confident of Luther's agreeing unhesitatingly that what is assumed to be true, by Christians or anyone else, in thinking and speaking about Jesus necessarily presupposes that the subject term "Jesus" does indeed succeed in picking out a real historical figure, about whom it is possible to make assertions of logically different kinds that are meaningful whether or not they are also true. And Luther, too, would undoubtedly want to say that this same presupposition is therefore also necessarily made by Christians in claiming, as they do, that the christological assertion is not only appropriate but also true—although its truth, like its meaning, is logically different from that of any of the many things they may simply assume about Jesus in asserting the one thing about him that they, as Christians, are given and called to assert.

A final word: The difference discussed here—between the logically different kinds of things that may be assumed or asserted about Jesus, truly or falsely, on the basis of the same necessary presupposition—is not the only important difference between *fides historica* and *fides apprehensiva*. No less important—

certainly, from Luther's standpoint—is the difference between faith as a merely intellectual matter of holding certain things to be true and faith as an eminently existential matter of laying hold of a word of promise, understanding oneself and leading one's life accordingly, in obedient trust and fidelity. But, clearly, taking account of *this* difference in no way affects the validity of the account I have given of the other difference, any more than proceeding in the reverse direction would do so. Analysis requires that *both* differences be accounted for if Luther's distinction between *fides historica* and *fides apprehensiva* is to be correctly understood.

21 April 2010

*Fides Historica, etc.*

To what extent could one say that Luther's distinction between *fides historica* and *fides apprehensiva* (cf. Gogarten: 75 f.) is the sufficient as well as the necessary condition of my distinguishing between *assuming* to be true and *asserting* to be true?

That it is at least the necessary condition of my distinction seems clear enough, as comes out in Luther's closely related distinction between the *res* or *factum*, on the one hand, and the *usus / vis rei* or *usus / vis facti*, on the other—this being just the distinction of which I make use when I argue that “the way it [sc. the witness of the New Testament] takes the fact of Jesus” is “not with reference to the empirical-historical question, ‘What actually happened?’ but rather with reference to the existential-historical question, ‘What is the significance of what happened (or is assumed to have happened) for human existence?’”

But it seems clear that Luther does not explicitly say, and presumably *would* not explicitly say, that assertions made on the basis of the *fides apprehensiva* could be true even though the assumptions made by the *fides historica* were false. At the same time, one could argue that he definitely *implies* just this when he says, “*das hilft nichts [sic !]*” if one “*glaubt, diese Historie sei wahr, wie sie lautet, . . . weil alle Sünder, auch die Verdammten das glauben*” (75). Surely, if it is *of no help at all* to believe that the history is true, since even the damned do that, it's hard to see how believing the truth of the history could even be a necessary condition of Christian faith.

14 September 1974; rev. 8 September 2003