

# The Historical Truth of the Gospels: An Official Pronouncement of the Pontifical Biblical Commission

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ON APRIL 21, 1964, the Pontifical Biblical Commission presented an "Instruction" on the "Historical Truth of the Gospels" to Pope Paul VI. His Holiness approved the "Instruction" and ordered its publication. The official text is, of course, in Latin and is entitled *Instructio de Historica Evangeliorum Veritate*; it is to be found in the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* for July, 1964 (Vol. XVI, No. 3), accompanied by an English translation. While this document is addressed primarily to the scholars, teachers, and writers of the Roman Catholic Church, it cannot fail to awaken the interest of all Christians.

The "Instruction" is conceived in the spirit of the great encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, which was published by Pope Pius XII in 1943 and was followed by an extraordinary outburst of activity among the biblical scholars of the Roman Catholic Church. During the intervening twenty-odd years, their contributions to the scientific study and exposition of the Holy Scriptures have been nothing short of magnificent. The massive learning of these men has been matched by a boldness and freedom that is hardly to be equalled anywhere, and certainly not to be surpassed. But there were indications that this movement was viewed with some apprehension in other quarters within the Church. Some of the theologians felt that the biblical scholars were cutting away what they had always taken to be solid ground from under their feet—a reaction not unfamiliar to biblical scholars of other communions. For a time, this uneasiness communicated itself to the highest authorities. The biblical scholars received warnings that they must not push their conclusions too audaciously. The great Jesuit scholar, Père Stanislas Lyonnet, was not allowed to continue teaching the New Testament in the Pontifical Biblical Institute at Rome, but was restricted to work in the field of Armenian. As he is probably the most accomplished scholar in the world in the study of the Armenian versions, this temporary period of relegation was not at all unwelcome to him and will probably result in further important contributions to our knowledge of the Armenian text of the New Testament. However, it was something of a shock that a man of his eminence should be refused permission to continue his teaching of New Testament exegesis and theology. (Happily, he has now been restored to his full duties, partly through the influence of Father Roderick Mackenzie, the former professor of Old Testament at Regis College, Toronto, who is

now Rector of the Institute.) There appeared to be some danger that the freedom of biblical scholarship might be curtailed, in spite of the wonderful fruits that it was bringing forth.

The new Instruction comes down firmly on the side of the widest liberty of scholarly investigation, and asks only that it should be exercised in a spirit of responsibility. The Catholic exegete "should not lose heart. He must keep on vigorously at his task of bringing out ever more clearly the genuine sense of the Scriptures." The Commission expresses its gratification that so many sons of the Church, possessed of the needed proficiency, "are devoting themselves wholeheartedly and with unflagging zeal to their weighty and exacting task" and it charges all the children of the Church that "the efforts of these valiant laborers in the vineyard of the Lord are to be judged not only with fairness and justice, but with the greatest charity." These words would appear to be directed primarily towards the theologians and administrators who have shown a spirit of suspicion and even of hostility in the matter, rather than to the unlearned who are not in a position to judge at all. They are reminded that "even interpreters of the highest reputation, such as Jerome himself, . . . have on occasion arrived at results which were far from happy." The suggestion clearly is that experts in other disciplines are not to be unduly perturbed over conclusions of modern scholars, even if they in their turn propose solutions to biblical problems that are "far from happy."

The Commission faces the fact that the truth of the events and sayings recorded in the Gospels is being challenged today in many publications with wide circulation, but it does not see in this any cause for limiting the freedom of responsible research. On the contrary, it calls all the more for the labours of exegetes. The Catholic exegete is urged to "turn to account all the resources for the understanding of the sacred text which have been put at his disposal by previous interpreters"; and also to "make skilful use of the new aids to exegesis, especially those which the historical method, taken in its widest sense, has provided." The Instruction mentions especially the minute investigation of sources, and the findings of textual criticism, literary criticism, and linguistic studies. The interpreter is reminded of the principles of hermeneutics laid down in the encyclical of Pius XII, specifically in keeping in mind that "the sacred writers . . . followed the way of thinking and of writing current among their contemporaries."

The interpreter is given explicit authority to make use of the method of form-criticism (*methodus historiae formarum*) in order to gain a fuller understanding of the Gospels. It is recognized that, in the hands of some scholars (probably Bultmann is chiefly in mind), "the method in question is found alloyed with principles of a philosophical or theological nature which are quite inadmissible"; others have been led astray by "rationalistic prejudices," or "have as their starting-point a wrong notion of faith, taking it that faith is indifferent to historical truth, and is indeed incompatible with it." Others underestimate the authority of the apostles, and correspond-

ingly overestimate "the creative capacity of the community itself." All this sums up with insight and accuracy the tendencies of some recent criticism and theological speculation in relation to the historical element in the Gospels. These "aberrations" are rejected as not only opposed to Catholic doctrine, but as also "devoid of any scientific foundation, and . . . foreign to the genuine principles of the historical method."

The Commission proceeds to remind the interpreter that he must take note of "the three stages of tradition by which the teaching and the life of Jesus have come down to us." These are, first, the instruction given by our Lord to his immediate disciples; secondly, the testimony of his apostles in their preaching and teaching; and thirdly, the work of the Evangelists in committing the tradition, or selected portions of the tradition, to writing. In giving his teaching to his chosen followers, Christ himself "observed the methods of reasoning and of exposition which were in common use at the time." There is no attempt to draw out the consequences of this observation, but it is of great importance to have it recognized that the teaching is temporally and culturally conditioned even in the mouth of Jesus. The document itself, however, is content merely to point out that Jesus thus "ensured that his teachings would be deeply impressed upon their minds and would be easily retained in memory by his disciples."

Coming to the second stage of the tradition, the Instruction notes that the primary element in the apostolic testimony to Jesus was the proclamation of his death and resurrection. Here we have the clear recognition that the task of the apostles is not merely to rehearse, like the students of a rabbi, the words that they have heard from the lips of their master, or to tell stories about him. The burden of their preaching is "Christ and him crucified"—the proclamation of the saving acts of God in him. All the words and deeds of Jesus were set in a new light for them by the resurrection, "when his divinity was clearly perceived"; but this did not blot out the remembrance of the events that had happened. Jesus was not transformed into a "mythical" personage, nor was his teaching distorted by the worship that they now offered to him as the Lord, the Son of God. "Yet it need not be denied that the Apostles, when handing on to their hearers the things which in actual fact the Lord had said and done, did so in the light of that fuller understanding which they enjoyed as a result of being schooled by the glorious things accomplished in Christ, and of being illumined by the Spirit of Truth." That is to say, the tradition is not passed on *simpliciter*, but has interwoven with it the apostolic interpretation, and is given in a great variety of forms "which must be distinguished one from the other and critically appraised . . . such literary forms as were commonly employed in Sacred Scripture and by people of that time." Again we have the recognition of the factor of environmental conditioning in the shaping of the tradition, within the first age of the Church. It might be felt that the document confines itself too narrowly to the *apostles* as the transmitters and interpreters and shapers of the tradition. It is impossible to close our eyes to the fact that

the transmission is not exclusively in the hands of the apostles, nor under their constant control. St. Luke tells us that many writers took it in hand to draw up an account of the events of the ministry of Jesus; and we must recognize that before the writers began their task, countless men and women of all ranks and conditions passed on to others what they had heard, unconsciously adding to it a measure of their own reshaping and interpretation and adaptation to changing circumstances. More especially, the mission was largely transferred from Jewish-Palestinian to Hellenistic territories within that first generation, and the sayings and stories of Jesus were passed on by word of mouth by and for people who had only the most superficial understanding of the religious traditions within which Jesus—and his immediate apostles—lived and thought; and there is no conceivable way in which the apostles could effectively control the reshaping that the tradition took as it was coloured by so many different minds. The Commission has gone a long way in recognizing the effects of adaptation to the circumstances and to the needs of the hearers during the first generation, but its Instruction appears to fix our thoughts too narrowly upon the work of the apostles as transmitters, and to take no account of the far greater complexities of a situation in which every Christian was free to tell others what he had heard, and to put it into his own words, often in a different language.

The third stage in transmission, according to the Instruction, is the committal of the tradition to writing by the four Evangelists. Between them and Jesus lies the entire generation of the apostolic age. Our earliest gospel, that of Mark, was not written until more than thirty years after the Crucifixion—perhaps the interval was closer to forty years; and all the other gospels are later.<sup>1</sup> The sacred writers, accordingly, worked with the tradition after it had undergone this long period of transmission “orally at first and then in writing.” (There are, indeed, indications that some of the materials used by them were already in written form, in brief collections of sayings, parables, conflict-stories, etc.) Their task was not confined to transcribing the accumulated materials. The important point is made that “each of them followed a method suitable to the special purpose which he had in view.” Three elements in their work are particularly noted: selection, synthesis, and explanation (*quaedam e multis traditis selegentes, quaedam in synthesim redigentes, quaedam ad statum ecclesiarum attendendo explanantes*). The relation of their work to the circumstances of the churches of the time is given stress. “For, out of the material which they

1. The Instruction says nothing about the date of composition of the Gospels. The above estimate would be accepted by most of my Roman Catholic colleagues, though some cherish the theory of an “Aramaic Matthew” (which, like the verbally inerrant “Princeton Bible,” is not extant anywhere on earth), that will have been published before Mark’s Gospel. They would agree that the Matthew actually in our possession (“Greek Matthew”) has made use of Mark, and is therefore a later composition. See the *New Testament Introduction* of A. Wikenhauser, translated from the second German edition, and published under the *Imprimatur* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1958).

had received, the sacred writers selected especially those items which were adapted to the varied circumstances of the faithful as well as to the end which they themselves wished to attain." The effects of "drawing them up in a systematic arrangement" (*redigentes in synthesim*) are seen as significantly affecting the meaning and making explanation necessary. "Since the meaning of a statement depends, amongst other things, on the place which it has in a given sequence, the Evangelists, in handing on the words or deeds of our Savior, explained them for the advantage of their readers by respectively setting them, one Evangelist in one context, another in another." No reference, however, is made to the possibility that certain words may have been spoken by our Lord in a context not given to them by any of the Evangelists, and that their original sense might be assessed very differently if the original context could be recovered. This is part of what Professor J. Jeremias has tried to do in his study of the parables; one of his "principles of transformation" is precisely the change of audience.<sup>2</sup> Professor C. H. Dodd evidently thinks that Jeremias as well as Bultmann goes too far in discounting the applications that are often attached to the parables, as almost wholly attributable to the editorial work of the Evangelists or to developments within the period of oral transmission that preceded them. He holds that "the primitive tradition underlying the variously differentiated traditions from which our Gospels are derived was certainly acquainted with applied parables." In some cases, he would trace the application as well as the parable back to Jesus himself. But even after this caution, he will go on to affirm that "there are grounds for suspecting that in many cases the application was not a part of the earlier tradition, but was supplied by the evangelist, or by his immediate authority, representing no doubt the current exegesis in that part of the Church to which he belonged."<sup>3</sup> The Instruction appears to allow for this, but once we have gone so far we have to relate our conclusions to the question of *historical* truth. It is one thing to claim that there is *spiritual* truth in the secondary application, and even to affirm that the Evangelists were led by the Spirit of God into making new applications of the teaching of Jesus to the changed circumstances of the second Christian generation. It is a vastly different thing to claim *historical* truth for every part of such a record.

The Commission is perfectly right, on the other hand, in its insistence that the exegete should concern himself with the Church's interpretation, as finally expressed in the writings of the Evangelists, and not merely with the original context and application of the sayings. The work of the critic is given no grudging acceptance, but is definitely seen to enrich our understanding of Jesus and his message. The exegete, they tell us, "will fail in his

2. Cf. J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, English translation by S. H. Hooke, rev. ed. (London: S.C.M. Press, 1962), pp. 33-48. He also draws attention to several other significant factors, such as "The Influence of the Church's Situation," "Allegorization," and "The Collection and Conflation of Parables."

3. C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, rev. ed. (New York: Scribner, 1961), pp. 14ff.

duty" unless he "pays attention to all those factors which have a bearing on the origin and composition of the Gospels." The Instruction affirms clearly the character of the Gospels as *preaching*, not mere recording. The Commission would probably not welcome such a startling assessment as that of the late T. W. Manson, that, "if we think in terms of strict historical documentation, these early Christians were guilty of tampering with the evidence."<sup>4</sup> But it is equally definite in accepting the fact that we are not to think in terms of strict historical documentation. The exegete will fail in his duty unless he "makes due use of the acceptable findings of modern research"; and among the "acceptable findings," it is affirmed that "the results of modern research have made it clear that the teachings and the life of Jesus were not simply recounted for the mere purpose of being kept in remembrance, but were 'preached' in such a way as to furnish the Church with the foundation on which to build up faith and morals." It follows that "the interpreter who subjects the testimony of the Evangelists to persevering scrutiny will be in a position . . . to throw into clearest relief the vital importance of the Church's interpretation."

After all this, it is somewhat of a disappointment to a scholar who is not under the Roman obedience to find the Commission insisting not only on the divine inspiration of the apostles and the Evangelists, but on the doctrine of inerrancy. "The interpreter must cherish a spirit of ready obedience to the Church's teaching authority, and must also bear in mind that when the Apostles proclaimed the Good Tidings they were filled with the Holy Spirit, that the Gospels were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and that it was He Who preserved their authors immune from all error." But if one Evangelist in handing on the words or deeds of our Saviour sets them in one context, while another sets them in another, how can they both be "immune from all error"? If we are dealing with *historical* truth, surely only one context can be right, and the other must be in error—unless, of course, neither context is historically correct.

It is impossible to quarrel with the charge to professors that they should "make theological doctrine the main subject-matter of their exposition." I have little patience with critics who initiate their students thoroughly into the intricacies of the Synoptic Problem, but never take time to help them find the meaning of the Beatitudes. It is not of much avail to analyse the differences between the Lukan "Blessed are you poor; for yours is the kingdom of God" and the Matthaean "Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," or to notice that Luke has four beatitudes while Matthew has seven or eight or nine, if we never get around to learning what Jesus has to teach us about the blessed life. So the Commission wisely urges that "professors, when they make use of critical methods, especially of what is called literary criticism, should not do so for the mere sake of criticism, but with a view to gaining by means of it a deeper insight into the sense intended by God speaking through the sacred writer."

4. T. W. Manson, *Ethics and the Gospel* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1960), p. 92.

It is not so certain that "those who instruct the Christian people through preaching" and "those who write for the Christian public at popular level" need to be charged so earnestly to be circumspect. The real danger today does not lie in the rashness of preachers and popular writers, but in their timidity and fearfulness about accepting the results of critical study for themselves and in mediating them to their hearers and readers. Certainly they should "avoid what is merely new-fangled," and "keep clear of the precarious fancies of innovators." But grave trouble is occasioned for the whole Church by the wide and widening gap between the scholarly understanding of the Bible and the general misunderstanding by the majority of the public. What is needed is that preachers and writers at every level should bend their efforts to make the results of scholarly investigation known far more widely, and to show that the continued use of the biblical writings for the nourishing of the spiritual life is not at all dependent on the maintenance of obsolete and untenable notions of their character. The Pontifical Biblical Commission has given notice to all that the Church's scholars are free to pursue the primary task of research. Is it too much to hope that it will cease to be worried about the possibility that the faith of some may be disquieted by a frank and fearless exposure to new and better ways of understanding the Sacred Scriptures, and that it may also take into account the great relief that is brought to many when they learn that fidelity to Christ and his truth does not require of them an uncomfortable acquiescence in notions that they shrewdly suspect have been abandoned long since by those more learned than themselves? The problem is not one for our Roman brethren alone; the same fearfulness is felt by many faithful priests and ministers of other churches, and the same apprehensions are often enough expressed by those who are in authority over us; and the result of it all is that our churches are hampered by a kind of biblicism that has become altogether untenable. It is time for us all to grasp the nettle, to cease trembling for the ark of the Lord, and to show that the modern critical understanding of the Scriptures makes them not less but more "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness."