

CHRISTIAN FAITH & TRUTHFULNESS OF BIBLE HISTORY

by Vosgeerhardus

Geerhardus Vos' essay examining the relationship between Christian faith and biblical historical accuracy, arguing against separating genuine belief from the truthfulness of biblical events.

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by Geerhardus Vos (1862-1949)

The following essay was an address delivered at the Religious Conference held in Princeton, October 10-12, 1905. This address was later published in the Princeton Theological Review (1906, vol 4, 289-305). This essay is now in the public domain and may be freely copied and distributed.

It will be generally agreed that the above subject has the merit of timeliness. For some time past the assertion has been made, and it is being made in our own day with greater confidence and insistence than ever, that our Christian faith and historical facts have very little or nothing to do with each other. Most frequently this assertion is made with reference to some one particular event of sacred history, which has for the time being become the subject of debate from the point of view of its historicity. Those who incline to doubt the historical truthfulness of some such narrative as, e.g., that of the supernatural birth or the resurrection of the Saviour, or at least incline to consider it an open question, are, when their skepticism awakens remonstrance from the conservative side, ever ready with the answer that Christianity is something too great and too deep, too inward, ideal and vital to be dependent in its essence on this or that single occurrence in the world of history. They protest that their own faith lives far superior to the level where such questions are discussed and decided, as to whether Christ was supernaturally conceived by the virgin Mary or rose bodily from the grave on the third day. And they are not slow to make their own subjective faith in this matter the standard of what is possible to Christian faith in its essence. But, while most commonly asserted with reference to such single facts, the position tends, from the nature of the case, to become a general one, involving the severance of the Christian faith from the historical facts in the widest sense. For, even if no other considerations came into play, the circumstance that the facts from which faith has thus begun to emancipate itself are not subordinate, but the great cardinal facts of sacred history, leads straightway to the inference: if these facts are not essential, if the Christianity of the heart can subsist and flourish without them, then assuredly the mass of minor historical events may be considered as of next to no importance. He who has once become reconciled to the idea that perhaps the resurrection account arose from a delusion of the disciples, or that the story of the virgin birth was the product of pagan conceptions, and thinks that his practical religion has suffered no loss through familiarity with such an idea, is not apt overmuch to vex his soul with the question of whether Abraham ever emigrated from Ur of the Chaldees, or whether the walls of Jericho fell down at the sound of the trumpets <<http://www.serverlogic3.com/lm/rtl3.asp?si=22&k=the%20trumpets>>. Thus people are gradually made ripe for the conviction that Christianity can survive, even though the whole substratum of history, on which hitherto it has been supposed to rest, should be withdrawn from under it. Twenty-five years ago this would have seemed to most a glaring paradox; at present it has become in many circles one of the dull common places of religious opinion. There can be no doubt, therefore, that the subject of the relation between Christian faith and the truthfulness of

Bible history is a timely subject to consider, not for abstract theological reasons merely, but even more so for eminently practical reasons touching the vital interests of the religion of the heart. We propose to deal with the subject by putting and briefly answering three questions:

(1) What causes are operating to spread this opinion, that Christian faith is in its essence independent of historical facts?

(2) What difference must it make to the content and nature of Christianity, whether it be considered necessarily connected with historical facts or the opposite?

(3) What is the general biblical teaching on the question whether Christianity is thus dependent on or independent of historical facts? In the first place, then, we ask: What causes are operating to spread this opinion, that Christianity is in its essence independent of historical facts? Under the head of this question undoubtedly the first place should be given to the remarkable development of historical criticism. Our age prides itself upon being preeminently the age of historical research. Nor is this a vain boast. More than in any previous period the records of the past are made the object of thorough, painstaking investigation. And what is most characteristic of this modern development of the study of history is that it possesses in a high degree the prime ingredient of the historical spirit, the faculty to throw itself back into the subjective mind of the past, to read and understand the conditions and developments of former times, not in terms of the present, but in the terms of those who were the living actors and makers of the history itself. We have reason to congratulate ourselves, not merely as cultivated men, but as Christians, that our lot has been cast in an age which thus honors the past by respecting its individuality. The kind of rationalism which ruled supreme more than one hundred years ago was sadly lacking in this very respect. It investigated not for the purpose of appreciating the mind of former generations, but only to expose after a schoolmasterly fashion the crudeness and folly of the ideas cherished by the past. The present age has, at least in the sphere of history, divested itself of this magisterial air. Whatever we may be in other departments of science, as historians we are more humble and less self-centered. We do not feel confident of being in the absolute possession of pure reason, and no longer identify history with the irrational or relative as such. And who would deny that great gains have accrued to our knowledge of revelation and Scripture from this growth of the true historical spirit? It has enabled students of the Word of God to lay aside their preconceptions and prejudices, to steep themselves in the atmosphere which enveloped the truth when it came fresh from heaven, to assume that receptive, responsive frame of mind which, if anywhere, is needed in appropriating a revelation of God. We know immeasurably more in result of the work of the last century than we would otherwise do of the conditions and circumstances under which the supernatural truth of God made its first appearance among men, and in consequence immeasurably more also of the everlasting content and purport of this truth. Nay, one can go further than this. Even where the historical investigation of the origin and growth of revealed religion and of Scripture has been conducted with a naturalistic bias and with the use of foolish methods-even there God has made the wrath of men to praise Him. We venture to say that the dissection of the Law and the Prophets, absurd though it be in itself, has had the indirect beneficial result of making us more intimately acquainted with the minutest peculiarities of the Word of God than we could have been, had not the necessity of defense, that was laid upon it, compelled Christian scholarship to scrutinize and rescrutinize the content of Holy Writ, so that not one jot or one tittle escaped investigation. Modern criticism has at least preserved or cured the church from

one fault-the fault of indolence in research with regard to the facts of God's revealed truth.

Unfortunately, however, there is another side to the matter. The historic spirit has not always worked in harmony with the principles that should govern its operation upon the Word of God. The danger that this might happen was inherent in the new method itself. As already stated, it is the aim of modern historical research to view developments from the inside, to catch the subjective tone and color of a period, to study it preeminently from its human point of view. Applying this to sacred history and the Scriptures leads almost inevitably to a wrong distribution of the emphasis. In redemption and revelation naturally not the human, subjective side, not the religious views and sentiments of men, stand in the foreground, but the great objective acts and interpositions of God, the history as it is in itself, not as it reflected itself in the mind of man. Facts, rather than the spirit of times or the consciousness of periods, should be here the primary object of investigation. But this imposed a certain restraint upon the trend of modern historical study, and the restraint has not always been exercised. I think we are all to some extent conscious of how much more interesting and congenial it is to study the Bible from the point of view of the human experience of the people of God than from that of divine procedure of redemption and revelation. Thus, without any necessary evil intent, the facts, the works of God, are relegated to the background, and involuntarily the perception of their importance becomes obscured. If I am not mistaken, the teaching of sacred history in our Bible classes and Sunday schools stands to some extent under the influence of this wrong tendency. It does not always sufficiently recognize what is primary and what is secondary in the Bible; it places the emphasis on the human instead of on the divine factor, while, to use the words of the late Dr. Davidson, the Scriptures contain almost exclusively a theology, God being the dominating and creative factor in the relation between Israel and Himself. But how much more dangerous must such a tendency become when it goes hand in hand with other most powerful forces working in the same direction. First of all, we are face to face with the fact that the immemorial conflict between naturalism and supernaturalism has, more than ever before, concentrated itself in the field of history. This could not be otherwise, because it is a conflict which always assumes the specific form of whatever mode of thinking is characteristic of the age. Formerly, when the historical spirit was comparatively dormant and the speculative spirit supreme, this fight was largely waged in the philosophical field. Then the question was: Is the supernatural conceivable on the general principles of reason? Now the question is: Is the supernatural necessary according to the empirical data of history? In other words, historical study has become a powerful instrument in the service of the antinaturalistic spirit of the modern age. Professing to be strictly neutral and to seek nothing but the truth, it has in point of fact directed its assault along the whole line against the outstanding miraculous events of sacred history. It has rewritten this history so as to make the supernatural elements disappear from its record. It has called into question the historicity of one after the other of the great redemptive acts of God. We need not say here that the apologetic answer to these attacks has been able and fully satisfactory to every intelligent believer. But the Christian public at large is not always able to distinguish between well authenticated facts as such and historical constructions in which the facts have been manipulated and their interpretation shaped by a priori philosophical principles. People are accustomed to look upon history as the realm of facts par excellence, second only to pure science in the absolute certainty of its concrete results. They do not as easily detect in historical argumentation as they would in philosophic reasoning the naturalistic premises which predetermine the conclusions. It is not difficult, therefore, to give the popular mind the impression

that it is confronted with an irrefutable array of evidence discrediting the Bible facts, whereas in reality it is asked to accept a certain philosophy of the facts made to discredit the Bible. Hence there has arisen in many quarters a feeling of uneasiness and concern with regard to the historical basis of facts on which Christianity has hitherto been supposed to rest. People have begun to weary of the endless attack and endless defense, and to ask themselves whether it may not after all be possible to escape from the wear and tear of these endless controversies by construing a Christianity which shall be independent of the facts of history. It appears to many a consummation devoutly to be wished to have the highest interests of the Christian faith on its practical side sheltered in some harbor where they would be absolutely safe, even though without the waves of criticism should sweep away the whole fabric of objective supernatural facts.

It were a mistake, however, to think that historical criticism is the only force driving people in this direction. Equal, if not more, influence must be attributed to the dislike of dogma and theology which is so widespread in our days. The present religious mind has a veritable dread of everything that is not immediately practical or experimental. Faith must be reduced to the most simple and direct terms attainable. In the rush of modern religious activities, in the eagerness to make Christianity keep pace with the secular forces of life in their accelerated and intensified movement, there is a nervous desire to throw overboard everything that can be in any sense considered superfluous ballast to the craft of practical religion. Thus the whole theoretical side of faith has fallen into neglect, and this neglect involves, besides other things, the historic basis of facts. In two ways this is brought about. In the first place, the mere dwelling of the mind upon the facts as such easily assumes the appearance of being so much energy lost. The facts partake of the same objective, impersonal, seemingly religiously indifferent character as do the doctrinal formulas of the creeds. They are no more to be suffered to interpose themselves between the soul and God than the Bible and the church dogma. And in the second place, it is perfectly well understood that where the great supernatural facts are allowed to enter or to remain as the necessary correlates of faith, there the doctrines cannot be consistently kept out. For what else are the doctrines but the theological interpretation of the facts? In order to become the proper object of religious contemplation at all, the history must necessarily first pass through this doctrinal alembic. It is safe to say that a Christianity which plants itself squarely upon the foundation of the supernatural history will always be a doctrinal Christianity and vice versa. Now from this it follows that a great share of the odium which attaches at the present day to every pronounced and vigorous doctrinal type of faith will inevitably fall upon the type of faith which clings firmly to any historical supernatural support. Hence, as Dr. Ernst Cremer has well observed,¹ the peculiarity of the present situation is not merely that the facts are neglected, but that in the name and for the sake of the integrity of the Christian faith itself the nonessentialness of the facts is clamorously insisted upon. It is held that where the facts play a central and necessary part in the psychological process of religious trust, that there faith must lose its purity and power. The influences so far considered are rather popular and practical in their nature. To these, however, we must add in conclusion the influence of the positivistic philosophy of the times, voicing itself in the theological sphere through the Ritschlian school. The fundamental principle of this philosophy is that the human mind is incapable of knowing the metaphysical reality of things and must content itself with cognizing phenomena, appearances. This applies in the field of religion to all metaphysical knowledge of God of a doctrinal nature; but it applies, of course, with equal pertinence to the cognition of the supernatural in history. For to know the supernatural in its historical embodiment would be nothing

less than to know the metaphysical reality of God obtruding itself into the world of sense. The events of history belong to that surface world of appearance, from which theoretically there is no transition to the realm of the unseen and eternal. If it be impossible to reach the invisible background of things in general, how much more impossible must it be to reach it in its highest form of supernatural operation?

Hence Harnack, the most eminent historian of the school, tells us that history is not able to take cognizance of any miracle as a scientifically ascertained occurrence, because by doing so it would abandon the basis on which all historical investigation proceeds (i.e., the basis of causally concatenated phenomena). And here also not merely the historical inaccessibility of the supernatural facts is asserted, but at the same time their elimination from the sphere of faith is joyfully hailed. This shows that in the position it takes this Ritschlian movement is determined not by purely philosophical motives, but is an exponent of the practical spirit of the age in its impatience of whatever may appear cumbersome in religion. For, where the conviction of the unknowableness of things in themselves rests on purely theoretical grounds, it is usually attended by a sense of dissatisfaction: the natural mind of man, thirsty for knowledge, rebels against the restrictions put upon it and seeks to regain in some practical way what it thinks to have lost theoretically. From this modern theological positivism such a note of resignation is entirely absent. It glories in its religious deliverance from the supernatural facts. The theoretical side in religion is not merely undervalued but scorned. This is simply the counterpart of what we see happen in the sphere of secular science. Notwithstanding the boast of our age of being supremely scientific, it might be truly said that the impelling force of its scientific development is not the desire to know but the desire to rule over nature. In religion it is precisely the same spirit which prevails: the desire is not to know the higher world, but, to use Ritschl's own definition, "with the help of the spiritual power which man adores, to solve the contradiction in which man finds himself as a part of the natural world, and as a spiritual personality." And, if we are not mistaken, precisely here lies the strength of the appeal which this theology makes to the consciousness of our age. It offers a deliverance from the troublesome and compromising supernatural facts which is not seized upon, as it were, under the stress and compulsion of the onslaught of criticism, but which seems to rest on a respectable philosophical and theological foundation. People no longer have to say: Christianity must be possible without belief in the facts, for the facts have become uncertain and religion is a necessity. They are now able to say: Christianity from its very essence, as we construe it, can dispense with the facts, and, if history fails to authenticate them, this makes us neither cold nor warm, because our faith is superior to such considerations. It requires no pointing out how much more comfortable and dignified the latter position is than the former.

Thus we see how the positivistic principle leads to the rupture of the bond between religion and history. And yet, strange to say, Ritschlianism boasts that of all systems it alone founds Christianity exclusively on the historic revelation of God in Christ. Nor need we wonder, from another point of view, that it takes this ground, for, where all natural theology is ruled out, there all the greater emphasis must be placed upon the historical source of the knowledge of God we possess. So the apparent contradiction arises that on the one hand religion is to be independent of the facts, and that on the other hand it is to rest on the historic revelation of God in Christ. We wish to show in a few words that the contradiction is largely apparent, and that therefore not too much credit should be given for this seeming recognition of the historic factor. The truth is simply this,

that when Ritschlians speak of the revelation of God in the historic Christ, they do not mean the same thing by the use of these words as we would mean in employing them. To us the history of Christ, and therefore the historical Christ, means the entire life of the Saviour with all its eternal issues included, replete with supernatural elements, involving the incarnation, the miracles, the resurrection; in other words, we find nothing in the two conceptions of the supernatural and historical which would be mutually exclusive. A thing is no less historical because it is supernatural; the supernatural is the highest history. Not so the Ritschlians. To them the historic Christ who reveals is not the Christ in the totality of His life, but a distinction is made between revealing and nonrevealing elements in the history of Jesus. And if we inquire more closely we find that the revealing elements consist in this, that in Christ there was presented to mankind a piece of perfect moral and religious consciousness and mediately through this, an indication of what God is for man. The much-used phrase, "the historical Christ," therefore means the empirical, phenomenal Christ and that subjectively considered. The phrase is not meant to cover the great supernatural events, which to our view form the backbone of gospel history, that in which we would say its revealing significance centers. Not the supernatural birth, not the atonement, not the resurrection, not the ascension, not the sitting at the right hand of God, not the return to judgment-not these make Christ the revelation of God to us, but the religious trust displayed by Him, the faithfulness He showed in His vocation, the perfection of His ethical conduct. The controversy about the Apostles' Creed which years ago so deeply stirred the Evangelical Church of Germany led the Ritschlian school unequivocally to define its position in this matter, and its representative spokesmen have held in every case that the fundamental facts registered in this ancient creed cannot, even apart from every dogmatic interpretation, as pure facts, be said to belong to the essence of the revelation Christ brought to the world or to enter vitally into the consciousness of the faith which appropriates this revelation. We see, therefore, that even in Christ the barrier which shuts us out from the supernatural in history is not effectually removed. Christ Himself struck at the bars in vain. The Saviour's own consciousness, so far as it was to Him a reflection of an assumed supernatural background of His life (in a transcendental sense), has no revealing authority for us. The historic revelation of God in Christ, instead of bridging over the gulf between the world of phenomena and the world of supernatural realities, is itself as absolutely surrounded by that gulf as our own consciousness. It reveals God as love, but for other questions we must not expect from it an answer.

Let us now proceed, and that more briefly, to answer the second question: What difference must it make to the content and nature of Christianity, whether it be considered necessarily connected with historical facts or the opposite? Whenever the assertion is made that the essence of the Christian religion and the facts of sacred history, as critically determined, have nothing to do with each other, this assertion is entirely beside the point, so long as no previous agreement has been reached as to what the essence of Christianity consists in. The assertion is usually offered as a sedative to Christian people whose nerves have become unsettled by the critical methods of dealing with the biblical facts. One would be justified, therefore, in assuming that the phrase "essence of Christianity" would be used in the sense given it by those for whom the comfort is intended. But this is by no means the case. The implication always is that, because these writers have accustomed themselves to hold a certain opinion as to the essence of the Christian faith, therefore the great majority of believing people will be ready to adopt that opinion, and as the basis of it to declare even the most radical criticism harmless. Now, as a matter of fact, the people who

are disturbed by the present-day criticism have their own view as to what the essence of the Christian faith consists in - a view they hold with a considerable degree of conviction; and it implies an astounding naivete on the part of the defenders of the negative criticism to suggest that they shall derive assurance from the fact that a type of Christianity which is not their own, nay, in many respects diametrically opposite to their own, is untouched by the critical conclusions. What shall it profit me to know that somebody else's Christianity is indifferent to the facts, when I also know that my own Christianity fundamentally differs from his, and that precisely in the point at issue, its interdependence with a system of facts, so that not even by the greatest stretch of tolerance can I call him a Christian in the sense in which I apply this name to myself? That the matter actually stands thus, a few moments of reflection will make abundantly clear. The difference between those who think they can do without the facts and us who feel that we must have the facts, does not lie on the periphery of the Christian faith: it touches what to us is the center. It relates to nothing less than the claim of our holy religion to be a supernatural religion, and a religion which objectively saves from sin. It would be easy to show that a Christianity which can dispense with the facts of Bible history must, from the nature of the case, be a religion confined by the horizon of the present life and the present world, lacking that supernaturalistic eschatological outlook which is so characteristic of the biblical religion as a whole, and of historic Christianity as well. But for the purpose of avoiding abstract theological discussion, we confine ourselves to the other, more immediately practical, aspect of the question, which concerns, as has been stated, the claim of our religion to be a religion which objectively saves from sin. It is in regard to the soteriological, or, if another, more popular, term be preferred, the evangelical character of Christianity that the old and the modern conceptions differ. Let us suppose for a moment that our religion aimed at nothing more than the disclosure of a system of truth for the spiritual enlightenment of mankind - that there were no sins to atone and no hearts to regenerate and no world to transform. In that case its connection with historical facts would have to be regarded as a purely incidental matter, established for the sake of a more vivid and effective presentation of the truth, and therefore separable from the essence of the truth itself. Obviously, further, it would on this supposition be of no consequence whether the historical mold into which the truth was cast consisted of a record of actual events, or of mythical and legendary lore having only a partial basis of facts, or of conscious literary fiction having no basis of facts at all. The same will apply to every view of religion which makes the action of the truth consist exclusively in the moral suasion exercised by it on the human mind. It is plain, however, that both these conceptions of the function of Christianity, the intellectualistic as well as the moralizing, are tenable only from the standpoint of Pelagianism with its defective sense of sin. To the Christian church, in the most catholic sense of the word, supernatural religion has always stood for something far more than a system of spiritual instruction or an instrument of moral suasion. The deep sense of sin, which is central to her faith, demands such a divine interposition in the course of natural development as shall work actual changes from guilt to righteousness, from sin to holiness, from life to death, in the sphere not merely of consciousness but of being. Here revelation is on principle inseparable from a background of historic facts, with which to bring man's life into vital contact is indeed the main reason for its existence. He who has once clearly perceived this will not even for a moment consider the possibility that his faith and such criticism as destroys the supernatural facts can peacefully dwell together in the same mind. To him the facts are become the very bread of life. Though you tell him a thousand times that the value of the biblical narratives for moral and religious instruction remains

precisely the same, whether the facts occurred or not, it will not satisfy him, because he knows full well that all moral instruction and religious impressions combined cannot save his soul. In his thirst for redemption from sin he will not rest in anything short of an authentic record of how God wrought wonders in history for the salvation of His people. History we need, and that not only in the form of the tale of a certain perfect ethical and religious experience, which has somewhere come to the surface on the endless stream of phenomena, but such a history as shall involve the opening of the heavens, the coming down of God, the introduction of miraculous regenerative forces into humanity, the enactment of a veritable drama of redemption between the supernatural and the natural world. Whether we like it or not, criticism can touch the essence of our religion, because religion has become incarnate, and for our sakes had to become incarnate and make itself vulnerable in historic form. As the Son of God while on earth had to expose Himself to the unbelief and scorn of men, so the word of the gospel could not be what it is for us unless it were subject to the same humiliation.

If what has been said be correct, it will follow that the proposal to declare the facts inessential betrays a lamentably defective appreciation of the soteriological character of Christianity. As a matter of fact, if one carefully examines the representations of those who claim that the results of criticism leave the religious substance of the Old Testament intact, one finds in each case that the truth left intact belongs to the sphere of natural religion and has no direct bearing on the question of sin and salvation. Such truths as monotheism and the ethical nature of God may still be found in the reconstructed Old Testament; what we look for in vain is the gospel of redemption. But the most convenient test for this is furnished by Ritschlianism. Sin is here treated purely as a matter of consciousness, and its deeper source in the corruption of nature is left out of account. And not only this, the seriousness of sin, even as a conscious state or act, is inadequately realized. Outside the sphere of Christianity all sin is interpreted as virtually a matter of ignorance. Its essence is not opposition to God, but the failure to recognize the true attitude of God towards man as love. The most pronounced form of sin is unbelief with reference to the love of God in Christ. That with such a view of sin, and from a standpoint which makes love the only knowable attribute of God, the church doctrine of satisfaction has no ground left to stand on is plain. What Christ has done to save us is not to bear the curse of sin in compliance with the demands of divine justice, but by holding fast to His vocation and trust in God notwithstanding His sufferings, He has assured us that, in spite of our sins, we are objects of the divine love. Thus our justification consists in nothing else than our being introduced by Him into the actual experience of the forgiveness of sins. Everything here, it will be perceived, moves within the sphere of the subjective consciousness: it is not a change of being, nor even a change of relation, but a change of thinking that is aimed at and brought about. The same method is applied to the various stages of what we call the mystical operation of the Holy Spirit upon the soul of the believer and his mystical union with Christ. Even where the terms are retained as expressive of thoughts which faith inclines to form, but which are unnecessary to its completeness, their meaning has become totally different. One cannot help receiving the impression that essentially the same effects might be produced by the ideas of the religious forces operating, though the forces were nonexistent themselves. No wonder, then, that a theology to this extent oblivious of the crying soteriological needs of the sinful world easily reconciles itself to the thought that the supernatural in history lies outside the province of our practical concern. We, for our part, believe, and we say it deliberately, that it were a thousand times better for the church to be torn and shaken for many years to come by the conflict

with criticism than to buy a shameful peace at the stupendous doctrinal sacrifice which such a position involves.

There is one more point we must briefly touch upon under this head. It might be said that the above line of reasoning, while perfectly applicable to the great cardinal facts of redemptive history, is not suited to guarantee the historicity of the great mass of smaller supernatural events recorded in the Scripture narrative. Granted that our salvation stands or falls with the actual occurrence of the supernatural birth of Christ and His resurrection, can we affirm the same with reference to, say, the historical character of Noah and Abraham and all that is related of their lives? To this we would answer as follows: If we can show that revealed religion is inseparably linked to a system of supernatural historical facts at its culminating epoch in Christ-as we think can be done-then this creates the strongest conceivable presumption that the same will hold true of every earlier stage of the process of its development. It is certainly reasonable to assume that God will have adjusted the course of things that led up to Christ, to the fundamental character of the work of Christ - in the sense that He will have scattered over it great miraculous interpositions, to shadow forth the true nature of redemption, and, more than this, that He will have hung it not on the slender thread of legend and fiction, but on the solid chain of actual history. We confess that it would impose a severe strain not merely on our intellectual belief in supernaturalism, but also on our practical faith, were we compelled to admit that back of the time of the prophets or of Moses there lies a great prehistoric blank, in which for aught we know God remained a hidden God. Redemption and revelation, in order to be intelligible and credible, require a degree of continuity. A system of supernatural interpositions which suddenly emerges from the midst of an immemorial evolutionary past satisfies neither our intellect nor our heart. And therefore we say, it is not a matter of small consequence whether or not we are permitted to continue to believe in the historical character of the account of the exodus or the patriarchal narrative. To make light of such questions is but a symptom of the spiritual levity of our age. Supernatural history is an organism, not a mechanical aggregate of pieces, and it behooves us to treat it with the respect that is due to the organism of a divine economy of grace. In every one of its parts, even those that might seem to us to have but the remotest connection with the center in Christ, it is worthy of our defense and protection.

We must endeavor to be very brief in giving the answer to the third question: What is the biblical teaching on the subject before us? For this reason we confine ourselves to the testimony of the New Testament writers. It is plain at a glance that the faith of the apostles and the faith of the apostolic church revolved around the great redemptive facts in which they found the interpretation of the inner meaning of the Saviour's life. To the earliest Christian consciousness doctrine and fact were wedded from the outset. Facts, like the incarnation, the atonement, the resurrection, the ascension, the future coming of Christ, were believed not merely in virtue of their miraculous character, as so many grounds of faith; they belonged to the very essence of the object of faith, constituted that in which faith laid hold of God. Of Paul it was unnecessary to show this, since it is universally admitted. The only question can be, whether by giving Christianity this historical content doctrinally interpreted, the apostle has not perhaps modified its original idea, a question to which we shall revert presently. In the Petrine type of preaching the events of the earthly ministry of Jesus obtain greater prominence, as was natural in the case of one who had companied with the Saviour to the end. But none the less here also the gospel and the gospel faith center in the death, resurrection and return of Christ. The same applies to the teaching of St. John.

Notwithstanding the broad treatment of the entire life of Jesus as an incarnate revelation of the Father, the principle is here also firmly upheld that we can ascribe such a character to it only in virtue of our affirmation of the coming of the preexistent Christ into the flesh, as a supernatural historical fact; and in the same manner the spiritual union between the believer and Christ is made dependent on the Saviour's glorification, another supernatural historical fact. The author of the epistle to the Hebrews defines faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the proving of things not seen," and thus makes it directly refer to the historical developments of redemption, as well as to the invisible realities of the supernatural world. Now it is, of course, possible to assert that in all this the apostolic conception of Christianity already represents a departure from the original idea of discipleship as preached by Jesus according to the synoptical tradition. Such a position, however, is an exceedingly precarious one to take. If it were true that the apostolic teaching had fundamentally modified the gospel of Jesus by substituting for a life taught and lived by Him a dogma about Him, then we would be face to face with the incredible fact that in the introduction of the gospel into the world ordinary care had not been taken that those who were its first witnesses and heralds should correctly apprehend its fundamental meaning. Who will believe that a gospel, thus cast adrift from its infancy, is a supernatural revelation of God? But, apart from this, it is not true that the synoptical tradition of the teaching of Jesus contains a message essentially different. Of course it was impossible for our Lord to make in His popular mode of preaching the great redemptive facts of His life the central theme, before these facts had transpired. But the important thing to observe is this, that on the one point at issue, the vital nexus between the gospel and a complex of supernatural facts, the synoptical teaching is entirely in harmony with the doctrine of the apostles. Jesus everywhere proclaims the gospel He summons men to accept as a gospel of the kingdom of God. And the kingdom of God, what else is it but a new world of supernatural realities supplanting this natural world of sin? If the Ritschlians do not clearly perceive this, it is due to their unhistorical, essentially modern interpretation of the kingdom as an ethical organization of mankind and nothing more. As soon as the incorrectness of this is recognized, the choice plainly appears to lie between acknowledging that Christianity is in its very origin, in the mind of its founder, and therefore in its essence, a system of facts, the gospel an interpretation of facts, or assuming that the misapprehension of the true nature of the gospel which enters into the apostolic teaching reaches back to the consciousness of Jesus Himself, that He did indeed bring the new revelation of God, but at the same time inadequately realized its import and subsumed it under a false category. For us, who actually believe in the supernatural origin of Christianity, the choice between these alternatives ought not to be difficult. But what, it will be asked, about the objection that historical facts ought not to be allowed to obtrude themselves between God and the believer? We would answer that to the New Testament writers this concentration of faith upon the historical realities of redemption does not in the least interfere with its personal character as a direct act of trust in God and in Christ. The Person is immanent in the facts, and the facts are the revelation of the Person. The history of Abraham, according to Paul, was written for our sake, that we might believe in God, and that this our faith in God might be a faith in Him that raised up Jesus, our Lord, from the dead, who was delivered up for our trespasses, and was raised for our justification (Romans 4:23-25). "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved" (Romans 10:9). Let us be humble; that we need this external embodiment of the principles of salvation as they exist in God is because we are sinners. Let us not ask here on earth what belongs to the state of the immediate

vision of God in heaven. No doubt there is an element of danger that the facts may become separated in our minds from the living God, who stands behind them. But this danger is unavoidable, so long as faith must have any intellectual content at all. The source of the danger does not lie in the facts or doctrines as such, but in the religious apathy and superficiality of our own minds, which seem no longer capable of responding to the wealth of spiritual forces stored up in the world of redemption. There is not a fact in which the Bible summons us to believe that is not the exponent of some great principle adapted to stir the depths of our religious life. The normal believer would feel the heart-beat of religion in every dogma and in every fact. To join in the outcry against dogma and fact means to lower the ideal of what the Christian consciousness ought normally to be to the level of the spiritual depression of our own day and generation. How much better that we should all strive to raise our drooping faith and to re-enrich our depleted experience up to the standard of those blessed periods in the life of the church, when the belief in Bible history and the religion of the heart went hand in hand and kept equal pace, when people were ready to lay down their lives for facts and doctrines, because facts and doctrines formed the daily spiritual nourishment of their souls. May God by His Spirit maintain among us, and through our instrumentality revive around us, that truly evangelical type of piety which not merely tolerates facts and doctrines, but draws from them its strength and inspiration in life and service, its only comfort and hope in the hour of death.

Notes 1. Cf. *Der Glaube und die Thatsachen in Greifswalder Studien*, pp. 263-283.

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