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Why Study the New Testament?*

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'New Testament studies', as most of us learned the discipline, depends on some fundamental assumptions: that scientific history leads us toward objective, secure knowledge of the past; that careful method can unlock the real meaning of a stable text; that we have an audience who genuinely care what we say. Every one of these assumptions has become problematic. For the future, we must not give up on historical research, but we must think more urgently about what it means to write history well. In our role as teachers of Christian communities, we need to examine ways in which texts are *used*, rediscovering the *formative* uses in place of an almost exclusive stress by 'biblical theology' on the *normative*. Finally, acknowledging the demise of Christendom, we must seek to engage an ever larger circle of discussion partners, seeking to overcome our isolation within the academy and within a world that has grown rapidly more diverse even as it has become astonishingly smaller.

I am deeply honored and more than a little surprised to stand here today as your president. It is very humbling to remember the long line of distinguished scholars who have held this post since 1947. In that year Johannes de Zwaan was elected, honored for his visionary conception and undaunted labor that had brought this society into being. Among the 56 names that follow his are most – though not all – of those scholars who have shaped the discipline that we practice. Only too conscious of being one of the dwarves who stand on the shoulders of those giants, I risk offending their memory and your patience by asking, What is it all about? Why should anyone study the NT?

In the constitution of this Society we are told that 'its aim shall be the furtherance of New Testament studies'. The language takes for granted that we know what 'New Testament studies' is. The question *why* it should be 'furthered' would probably have seemed to the founders frivolous – though I have no doubt that, had it been asked, they would have found it relatively easy to answer. Not *simple*, to be sure, but easy. At that time, a bit more than half a century ago, the difficult questions had to do with *how*, not *why*, and certainly not *whether*. Today the situation is quite different. The question 'Why study the New Testament?' is *not* easy to answer, and any positive answer we may give will have to be even more

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complex than it would have been in 1947. It is urgent, I believe, for those of us who have defined our professional lives around such study to put the question as candidly as possible and to answer it as clearly and honestly as we can.

Academic disciplines are not made in heaven. 'New Testament studies' has a history. The way we in this Society understand the term belongs to a quite particular segment of cultural and even political history. The little group of friends and scholars who met with Johannes de Zwaan in 1937, in a restaurant in Edinburgh, to talk about the possibility of an organization like this, must have been keenly aware that they lived at an ominous moment in the history of the modern world. Their vision, which enabled them to see, beyond the dangers of that moment, the possibility of a mutual enterprise of study that would cross hostile political boundaries, that would search for truth, for hope, and for life in a time of propaganda, despair, and death – that vision, I submit, stamped the identity of this Society from the beginning. That vision accounts for the determination with which the surviving founders gathered in March 1947 for the first General Meeting, postponed by war for seven years, chastened but undaunted.[1]

The revised Constitution approved at the Barcelona meeting added a significant word to the Society's statement of purpose: the word 'internationally'. Henceforth, our 'aim shall be the furtherance of New Testament studies *internationally*'. The adverb will serve, I hope, as a quiet reminder of the vision those founders kept alive at a time when the international scene seemed very bleak indeed. I hear in this word the subtle echo of a conviction that this odd endeavor, this taken-for-granted but undefined 'New Testament studies', might have consequences in the 'real' world outside academia. The fact that we add the adverb at this particular moment of our Society's history suggests something more. It gently reminds us that the boundaries of our world, the perceived world within which we want to 'further' NT studies, have vastly expanded in the past few decades. The enlargement and diversification of our membership is vivid evidence of that expansion. Moreover, the Society has embraced and encouraged this enlargement and diversification in both symbolic and practical ways. However, we have *not* talked very much about what these historic changes might imply for the very shape of that thing we do, 'New Testament studies'.

What I should like to do here is to open that conversation in a small way. I shall begin by outlining a few of the things that we have taken for granted for most of the half-century since SNTS was founded. Then I shall suggest, all too briefly, some of the ways each of those assumptions has become problematic in our time. Finally, I will set out a few propositions about the road ahead.

1 See G. H. Boobyer, 'The Early History of Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas', originally published in the *Bulletin of the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas* 1 (1950) 7–10; available on the SNTS website: http://www.ncl.ac.uk/snts/history.html.

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Taken for granted

The list of assumptions that we customarily make without examining them could be very long, but there are three that seem to me fundamental to the practice of NT studies into which most of us were inducted in our student years. First, we have seen NT studies as an *historical discipline* and ourselves as historians. Second, we have known that, however many ancillary methods we might press into service, the central endeavor was always *exegesis*. Before anything else, we were readers of texts. Third, we have assumed an *audience* for our work, people who cared what we said.

Modern NT studies marched onto the field in the train of historicism – a temporary triumph, but a brilliant one. In these more timid or more cynical days, let us not forget the exhilaration of each of the small victories implicit in that triumph. Let us remember that for most of us, as for our intellectual forebears, the science of history was a weapon of liberation. It was bequeathed to us by those who had engaged in the hard-fought struggles of Reformation, Enlightenment, and the Modernist–Fundamentalist controversies. And we, on those occasions when we managed to write history fairly and honestly, did experience that liberation ourselves. We saw ourselves, our students, sometimes even our churches, being set free from lazy credulity, from dogmatic abstractions, from venomous prejudices, from authoritarian structures – all just by telling what we perceived to be the truth about the past, especially about the *beginnings*. Of course, as my political and military images are meant to suggest, our practice of writing history was never innocent. It was a means of power. As knowers and purveyors of the truth – *wie es eigentlich gewesen* – we laid claim to commanding positions, especially in the establishment constituting academic theology. History was the foundation of our professional standing both in the academy and in the church.

All of this was possible because history had taken a new turn, in the age of Enlightenment and in the era when the new empirical sciences were celebrating success after success. History now was science, was *Wissenschaft*. Objectivity was our ideal. The natural sciences were, if not our models, at least the chief objects of our envy. Comparison was our substitute for the laboratory experiment.[2]

We were not only historians, however. Perhaps not even primarily historians. Centrally we saw ourselves as *exegetes*. Whether we were exegetes in order to be historians or historians in order to be exegetes was and remains a question that divides us and a question about which many of us individually feel considerable ambivalence. The fact that we are named *Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas* rather than, say, *studiorum religionis christianæ antiquæ societas* does not quite

2 Following Weber's classic distinction between the social sciences and the natural sciences, Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (trans. and ed. A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons; New York: Free Press, 1964) 97.

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settle the matter. The name acknowledges that the *central* texts to which we give our exegetical attention are those 27 documents included in the church's canon. But we have never imagined that those were the *only* texts we needed to know – nor even that we could understand those canonical texts without also knowing many others. That the 'many others' have multiplied through the discoveries of recent years only makes the problem more visible. The fact that many of those other texts, especially some of those newly recovered, were once also 'scripture' for some early Christians compounds the question for the historian. It reminds us, too, of the odd paradox all too often forgotten, that during the period of the nascent Christian movement in which we aim to be expert, there was as yet no NT. That we are exegetes, then, we all agree. That the documents which became the NT (a bit later than the period of our expertise) are the *main* thing we aim to explicate, we also agree. But the question remains, *why*? Perhaps it is better to ask, *for whom*?

The most fundamental, least examined, and perhaps most fragile of our assumptions was that there was an audience for whom what we said mattered. Some members of that audience hated our work, others loved it, but they all cared. It is obvious but nevertheless important to bear in mind that this audience did not simply exist as a fact of nature. It, too, had a history; it belonged to a particular time and place. The kind of study we do was indigenous in a specific cultural context, namely, western Christendom, as it had evolved in the high modern period of, mainly, northern Europe, Britain, and their American diasporas. This implied audience was protestant. That was very shortly to change, most dramatically in the public transformation of Roman Catholic biblical scholarship after *Divino afflante Spiritu* and the Second Vatican Council. The rapid increase in the number of Roman Catholic members of SNTS was one evidence of the change. More gradually, but at an accelerating pace, came the scholars from the Eastern churches. Even with these changes, however, the sensibilities of the audience implicit in the kind of scholarship most of us did were, one might say, genetically protestant. The most obvious sign of the protestant bias I'm talking about is the centrality of preaching in talk about exegesis. That is, the action point at which the product of our studies, we hoped, would eventually filter down to ordinary people was the sermon. We wrote, if for anybody outside our own charmed circle, for theologians, and theologians were instructors of preachers. The genre which most clearly announced who we were was the commentary. And commentaries are sold in the hope that they will help preachers to declare, Sunday by Sunday, the Word of God to their flocks – however vain that hope may appear in practice. I am surely one of the very few persons in this audience who have never written and do not intend ever to write a commentary, but I know that, by the common assumptions of our discipline, I have thereby exposed my authenticity as a NT scholar to serious question. Naturally there were always among us some who had a much

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larger view of the ways the NT might function in the churches. And there were even some who struggled to find ways of addressing an audience outside the churches. Nevertheless, I think it is fair to say on balance that the audience implied by the very structure of our kind of NT studies has been specific to western Christendom of a peculiarly protestant sensibility.

Crumbling pillars

I do not need to tell any of you – certainly not the younger members of our company – that not one of these foundations of our particular kind of NT studies can any longer be taken for granted. Not the reliability of history, not the stability of the text, not a receptive audience. The three pillars of our self-confidence have crumbled. To analyze the history of the changes that have produced our present situation would require a large book. I wish some of our students would undertake it. Obviously I cannot even begin to outline that project; I can only mention a few high points.

First, the matter of history. Of course, what we like to call the historical-critical method – not *a method* at all but a family of approaches and habits, a variable set of perspectives, in short *a practice*[3] – has been under more or less continual attack since it began to take its present shape some two and a half centuries ago. But until recently most of the attacks came from people whom we could dismiss as hidebound conservatives, who were simply discomfited by many of the results of modern historical inquiry. What made them angry was that our kind of exegesis, often as not, failed to support traditional beliefs. For those of us who marched under the banner of either the *ecclesia semper reformanda* or that of enlightened liberation of the human spirit, that was a sign that our practice was working as it was supposed to. What is new is a wide and spreading disillusionment with our practice because of its perceived failure to produce the results it promised. Where is that objectivity of vision which we claimed? Where is that confidence which disinterested scientific observation and analysis was supposed to yield? I leave aside for the moment the fact that we are not alone. We do share this disillusionment with many other fields in the academy today, but that is rather cold comfort. We need to reflect on a few of the reasons why our own particular practice has lost, even for us, its self-evident validity.

First, our 'historical-critical method' has been linked – one might say, almost *accidentally*, because of its own history – with certain philosophies of history, certain grand narratives: the naive progressivism of late nineteenth-century protes-

3 See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (trans. Richard Nice; Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology 16; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1977), and Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (trans. Richard Price; Cambridge: Polity, 1990).

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tant liberalism; post-Kantian idealism; most comprehensively, the conception, beginning with Descartes, of the disembodied rational self as the arbiter of truth.[4] As those grand narratives have lost their power to persuade, suspicion has fallen also onto those practices that were entangled with them.

A related development has been what one might call in a very general sense the unmasking of *ideological* dimensions of our practice. The strongest shock of this type came in the aftermath of the Holocaust that occurred in Europe during Germany's Third Reich. Trying to uncover the roots of that horror, we were forced to confess that our exegetical labors had not only failed to produce a clear voice opposing the centuries-old tradition of anti-Semitic readings of the NT, they were all too often implicated in the support of anti-Jewish policies.[5] The results of that shock, I think all of us will agree, were salutary. Challenged by the acknowledgement of this huge blind spot in our vision of history, we learned to do better history. Aided by the coincidence of major new discoveries by archaeologists, iconographers, and others, a new burst of revisionist history produced a much better understanding of ancient communities of Jews and Samaritans, and consequently of the origins of the Christian movement as well.

But no sooner had we regained something of our equilibrium from that shock than we were attacked in turn by feminists, by liberationists, by post-colonialist interpreters – to name only the most prominent. They pointed out that the vast majority of us were white males of European descent. (They were right: take a look at the list of past presidents of SNTS. The induction of Barbara Aland in 2005 in Halle will exactly double the number of women who will have held that office.) More important, they showed us things we had failed to see in the early Christian documents. And those blind spots were very serious holes in our armor of objectivity. Those failings demonstrated that interest does not have to be conscious in order to serve privilege.

In recent years we have seen two kinds of response to these challenges. The first is, in effect, benevolent cynicism. That is, one may argue that, if class, gender, or group interest is implicit in every historian's work, then we ought self-consciously to choose to make the interest of marginalized or disadvantaged groups foremost. That has a certain moral appeal. The trouble is, if the warrants for our assertions become nakedly ideological, however 'good' the ideology, those warrants can only be enforced by exercise of power, not by persuasive argument.

4 See esp. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1989).

5 The name of Gerhard Kittel, who attended the formative planning committee for SNTS in Birmingham in 1938, is a prominent and instructive example; see Wayne A. Meeks, 'A Nazi New Testament Professor Reads His Bible: The Strange Case of Gerhard Kittel', *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel* (ed. Hindy Najman and Judith H. Newman; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2004) 513–44.

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Then the struggle to control the instruments of research and communication replaces the search for truth. It is one thing to acknowledge that our search for truth is always infected by politics, including academic politics; it is quite another to yield to the cynical view that the one is *only* the mask for the other.

Fortunately, that degree of cynicism has not yet won the day. The commoner and more hopeful response has been the resolve to do better history. The feminists have taught us all to read as feminists. The post-colonialists have helped make us all alert to the oppressive constructions and uses of history. The Marxists have pushed us to unmask the structures of power cloaked in the interpretations pretending to be fact. The social historians have taught us to probe behind the words of the elite writers of ancient texts for traces of the typical life worlds of those unrecorded people who were the first Christians and their neighbors. All of these revisions of our way of doing history have been important, but each has its own pitfalls, and together they contribute to that vertigo we sometimes sense today, as our discipline changes constantly beneath our feet. Because I have been particularly involved in the turn to *social* history, I will single out as an example one of the traps that besets the appeal to the social sciences.

In the 1970s, students of Christian origins began to follow our colleagues in other branches of history, including the history of the Roman Empire, by attempting to describe what we called 'the social world' of the early Christian groups. We were, I believe, modestly successful. However, we rather quickly ran into the sheer limits of data available in our sources and in the material remains presented by archaeology. At that point, at which the inductive testing of hypotheses that is the hallmark of science becomes most difficult, some were tempted to substitute a deductive use of sociological or anthropological theory. In the attempt to regain that triumphant objectivity once claimed by nineteenth-century historicism, appeal was made to putative *laws* of social behavior. From such laws, *models* of social organization and action could be contrived, and from those models we could deduce what the early Christians *must* have been like, even where data were lacking. Here we see a clear example of that 'physics envy' that the historian of modern Europe John Gaddis finds too often in the social scientists.[6] Ironically, the physics they envy is not physics as practiced today. Even more ironically, the move to deduction from universal to particular in the quest of certainty implies a turn back to a *pre*modern science – that tradition-free *scientia* associated with 'demonstration' and 'certainty' that Descartes attempted to rescue by laying those very 'foundations' in 'inner persuasion' that have now crumbled under the assaults of postmodern philosophy.[7]

6 John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York: Oxford University, 2002) 89 and *passim*.

7 Jeffrey Stout, *The Flight from Authority: Religion, Morality, and the Quest for Autonomy* (Notre Dame, IN/London: University of Notre Dame, 1981) 6f., 37–61.

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The second of the pillars on which we have taken our stand is exegesis. When all else fails, we rest secure in the thought that we are expert readers of texts. And what wonderful texts they are! The question of Stanley Fish's famous title, 'Is There a Text in This Class?', strikes no fear in us. Of course there is! But his subtitle does make us pause: 'The Authority of Interpretative Communities'. Even in textual criticism, that most technical and foundational discipline of our practice, we have slowly emerged from our quest for the *Urtext* to ask how many of those variants our predecessors dismissed as 'errors' represent what Jim Kugel calls 'The Bible as It Was', i.e., the way the text was read and understood by the 'interpretative community' of some particular time and place. Indeed, given what we have learned about the prehistory of the canon, is the notion of a single *Urtext* even a meaningful idea?[8]

If the 'original text' has proved to be beyond our powers to reconstruct and, perhaps, even a false notion in itself, how much more problematical is the notion of 'the original meaning' of a text. In our lifetimes a cacophonous chorus of philosophers, critical theorists, and practical critics have challenged the goal of finding some unchanging sense, whether residing in the intention of the author or somehow within the text itself. Meaning, they urge, is always transactional, the force of a statement always contextual, all texts malleable and their functions transformable through time. Let it suffice to quote two examples. First, Bakhtin, who proposed an 'ecological model of semantics', as two of his leading interpreters summarize: 'There is no such thing as "the text itself," that autotelic object dreamed up by Russian Formalists and American New Critics. There are only texts that are more or less implicated in their environments . . . .'[9] Second, Wolfgang Iser, who observes that in our time the classical paradigm of interpretation has been displaced: '[I]n place of the Platonic correspondence between idea and appearance, the focal point now is the interaction between text and, on the one hand, the social and historical norms of its environment and, on the other, the potential disposition of the reader.'[10] If a temporal gap of centuries and a cultural gap still broader yawn between the reader and the text's original environment, and if the 'potential disposition of the reader' is complicated by the text's attrib-

8 Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretative Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1980); James L. Kugel, *The Bible as It Was* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1997); on the contextual engagement of textual criticism and the question of the 'original text', see Bart D. Ehrman, 'Text and Tradition: The Role of New Testament Manuscripts in Early Christian Studies. The Kenneth W. Clark Lectures, Duke Divinity School, 1997', *TC: A Journal of Biblical Textual Criticism [http://purl.org/TC]* 5 (2000).

9 Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1984) 210.

10 Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, 1978) 13–14.

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uted status as sacred scripture, then the situation of the interpreter is even more complicated.

Bakhtin's and Iser's observations lead us directly to the problem of our third crumbling pillar, the audience. Who are *our* 'implied readers'? I said above that our primary audience were theologians; the focal consumers of our product – paradigmatically represented by the popular commentary – were preachers; and insofar as we took account at all of our academic colleagues in other disciplines or of the masses outside the churches, our unspoken and usually unconscious assumption was either that they were culturally Christian or that they could be ignored. The social and cultural bases for those assumptions have all changed. As a result we find ourselves today approaching a state of complete isolation: within the university, lonely practitioners of a quaintly antiquated craft; in the larger world, distant voices scarcely heard within communities of faith and, in the noisy public realm informed by global corporate media, not noticed at all except when we say something truly outrageous.

The world has changed beneath our feet. That culture of Christendom which, however fragmented and attenuated, could still be taken for granted when our discipline took shape has now faded until hardly as much is left of it as the Cheshire cat's grin. The process has been more complicated than 'secularization', though that term is a convenient shorthand for what has happened in Europe. Here, if statisticians and sociologists and a visitor's casual observations of a Sunday are to be believed, the audience comprising those people who actively participate in church life grows smaller and smaller. The same is true of traditional religious belief. Correlatively, the number of people who would regard the NT as *religiously* important to themselves is a small minority of the population.[11]

In North America, by contrast, polls continue to show that a surprisingly high percentage of people 'believe in God', think religion is important in their lives, and even participate with some regularity in some organized religious activity. What has changed, it seems, is that those denominations in which historical critical study of the Bible really had some influence have grown smaller relative to total population. To put it another way, those Christian groups that appear to be growing most rapidly on the American religious landscape, and for whom the Bible is most important, are those which either ignore or deplore the kind of scholarship we do. Moreover, the nature of mass-media communications leads to a polarization between general religious skepticism, on the one hand, and religious fundamentalism, on the other. The middle ground becomes invisible. Reasoned

11 On the importance of recognizing this 'post-Christian' culture for our hermeneutical task, see, e.g., Heikki Räisänen, *Beyond New Testament Theology: A Story and a Programme*, 2nd edn (London: SCM, 2000) 152–9, and Ulrich Luz, 'Mythos und Christologie', unpublished paper, Seminar: Inhalte und Probleme einer neutestamentlichen Theologie, SNTS 58th General Meeting, Bonn (2003).

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discourse about matters of religion has little chance of being heard in the public arena.

Our audiences in Europe and North America have dwindled and changed. At the same time, we awaken to the reality that Europe and North America can no longer pretend to be the center of the universe. We have entered a much more diverse world, and the diverse world has entered our societies. The voluntary and involuntary migrations of people in the aftermath of World War II, the Cold War, and various regional wars, as well as the ongoing transformation of the global economy in recent decades, are bringing about a mixing of cultures on an unprecedented scale. In the countries that were the home of 'New Testament studies', this means the practical dissolution of the congruence between national and religious identity. The talk we hear today about 'Christian Europe' and 'Christian America' represents nostalgia, not reality – witness the recent debate about the constitution of the European Union.

On the other hand, people who never shared in the myth of Christendom, except as objects of our missionary endeavors, have now become our neighbors. When I telephone a company in Texas to ask for help and am answered by a technician in Bombay, I know this is not the same world as the one in which I grew up. 'Globalization' is a fact. Whether it represents variants of the old imperialisms or something new altogether, it brings new forms of consciousness and new forms of life which we cannot ignore. In this world, are there still audiences for whom disciplined, critical interpretation of the NT may be important? Yes. But they are likely to be quite different from the audiences implied by the organization of academic study of the NT which we have known.

The way forward

Neither a prophet nor a prophet's son, I have no oracular insight into the future of NT studies. I do have some convictions, born out of 40-odd years' labor as a herdsman and a gatherer in the fields and groves of antiquity, and I offer you a few of those, not as *obiter dicta*, but as propositions to be debated.

First, as to history: let us keep doing it. As the American humorist Mark Twain said about a newspaper account of his death, reports of the demise of historical criticism are greatly exaggerated. The fact that many of the 'assured results' of previous scholarship are now called into question does not imply that the task of history is over; rather the contrary. The task of reconstructing a more fair and honest picture of the past never ends. There are always new discoveries to be assimilated, unconsidered factors to be evaluated, fresh comparisons to be weighed, novel perspectives to challenge our assumptions, blind spots in our own seeing that will become evident only when new pairs of eyes join the search. All this – the unfinished and even provisional nature of all historiography – consti-

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tutes yet another reason for modesty. It may even be cause of a certain weariness on the part of some of us, who now will look to a new generation to take over the task of Sisyphus. But it is certainly not reason for despair, nor for giving up the task. If you want clear signs that the work of the historian is not finished and not irrelevant, only contemplate the perennial appearance of religious and biblical themes in popular culture, ranging generally from the silly to the outrageous, and the perverse uses of such topics in political discourse, especially in the United States. Critical history of the Christian movement and of the Christian texts is needed more than ever.

But what kind of history? To begin with the simple question of subject matter, most of what we write is still focused in the history of ideas, even narrowly the history of doctrine; far too little aims at the history of communities. That is all too natural for people who were trained as theologians; it is almost impossible to change if we see our audience as mainly fellow theologians. The great service that the university can perform for us, or, more important, for future generations of our students, is to provide a broader audience of critical readers who will challenge the assumption that doctrine is the foundation of life. In ways that could hardly have been anticipated only a few years ago, 'religion' and even 'the Bible' are becoming topics for serious investigation in parts of the university that are altogether independent of the theological establishments to which our discipline has traditionlly belonged. These inquiries, by philosophers, analysts of culture, literary critics, and social scientists, are for the most part quite innocent of the historical narratives we have been constructing, but there is potential here for serious dialogue. One thing we should insist on in this dialogue is that all sides must pay attention to the social forms and uses of religion, to avoid the idealistic reductionism implicit in narrow focus upon concepts.

Second, we ought to place new emphasis on the history of interpretation. Practically speaking, we have done rather well with the prehistory of texts, considerably less well with the history of their later reception and effects. The *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the NT – and of those non-canonical texts in its penumbra about which we have come to know so much more in recent years – remains a vast field still crying out to be explored in depth. Those of us who venture into it will need help from many colleagues in neighboring disciplines.[12] One further practical note: we very much need monographs on the social history of modern NT studies, which will both depend upon and contribute to a social history of the modern university and of modern intellectual culture.

12 John Riches, 'Text, Church and World: In Search of a Theological Hermeneutic', *Biblical Interpretation* 6 (1998) 205–34. On the importance of reception theory for a theological hermeneutics, see Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, 'The Crisis of Scriptural Authority: Interpretation and Reception', *Interpretation* 44 (2001) 353–68.

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Behind these and the other practical tasks that loom before us is the central hermeneutical question: What is history and what are its uses? Chastened by the postmodern situation, we must revisit the question whether history is art or science. Surely it is both, and in some ways it is easier to recognize that today. The partial convergence of recent critical theory and recent philosophy of science enables us to see that poetry and astrophysics lie, in a sense, on a single spectrum of human constructions that try to present in orderly fashion what we perceive to be true. The hard problem is to say just where on that spectrum the writing of history should be located: how far from poetry, how close to science. We need to think about that. Let us confess that all history is fiction, but not all fiction about the past is history. History is fiction about the past that is *corrigible*. One may very well say that there are no facts without interpretation, but nevertheless there are facts.

And what about our second pillar, the text? I am still old-fashioned enough to believe not only that the writing of history is a big part of our vocation but also that exegesis is our primary craft. As we are buffeted by the many winds of change, let us remember what we know in our bones: that the honest and fair reading of an ancient text requires hard work, demanding from us every ounce of skill and knowledge we can muster. Whatever else we teach our students, let us teach them that. And something more: in an age in which deconstructionists have thrown the text to the mercy of the reader – which is to say, most often, of the academic critic – it is the job of the exegete to stand as the defender of the text's integrity. I do not mean 'integrity' in any formalist sense, although respect for the form of the text is, of course, fundamental. I mean rather that we ought to aim to say what the text would have meant, what its *force* would have been, in its historical context, when read or performed before a competent audience. Further, since I just called for more attention to the history of the text's uses and abuses, its receptions and its effects, I do not equate 'historical context' with 'original context', although I think it will always be important to emphasize the difference between the earliest and the later uses of the text.

Yes, the *uses* of the text ought to be at the forefront of our hermeneutical thinking. It will take conscious effort to shake off the curious prejudice inherited mostly from Western church polemics, that the fundamental use of the text is to establish right doctrine. Focusing on the normative uses of texts, we have neglected the *formative* uses. I hope that not only the historians of religion but also our colleagues from the Eastern churches can help to remind us that the formative uses – in liturgy, hymnody, and contemplative discipline, in the shaping of ethos and the formation of conscience, in the making of discourse and of art – are logically and developmentally prior to the normative uses.[13]

13 On 'formative' vs. 'normative' uses of scripture (and scriptural interpretation), see John K. Riches, 'Theological Interpretation of the New Testament and the History of Religions: Some

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In the world after Christendom, moreover, we have the opportunity and indeed the obligation to think seriously about the uses and abuses of the text in the public arena. And that public arena now belongs to a world grown at once wildly diverse and very small. That brings us back to our third area of concern: to what audiences should we be speaking?

The primary audience will continue to be the whole unruly assortment of faith communities for whom the documents we are interested in are construed as part of sacred scripture. There is no reason to be embarrassed about the proprietary claim that these groups make on us, even in our more or less post-Christian age, even in academic realms where any actual religious conviction is likely to be seen as an infection threatening the value-free operating theatre of the mind. After all, it was religious uses of these texts that made them into a cultural force, not the other way round. If it were not for that history, the attention we devote to this tiny corpus of texts would be inordinate. No, it is perfectly appropriate that we should speak first of all to believers. The embarrassing thing is that so little of what we say and write is of any immediate use to them. It is embarrassing because, more than two centuries after Gabler and a century after Wrede, we still do not manage to say straightforwardly what difference it makes in the practice of Christian faith if one learns to read the NT documents in their historical contexts and if one learns more about what the earliest Christians were probably like. There are plenty of things to be said on this topic. We are inhibited from saying them, I think, partly because we have a bad conscience for having claimed too much in the past. And we are also inhibited by our defensiveness against those who want to jettison historical criticism altogether. We will not easily agree about what needs to be done to make the interpretative situation clearer, but let us begin the argument. To that end, I commit the following provocation: we should start by erasing from our vocabulary the terms 'biblical theology' and, even more urgently, 'New Testament theology'. Whatever positive contribution these concepts may have made in the

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Reflections in the Light of Galatians 5:17', *Antiquity and Humanity: Essays on Ancient Religion and Philosophy Presented to Hans Dieter Betz on His 70th Birthday* (ed. Adela Yarbro Collins and Margaret M. Mitchell; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001) 245–62, 261–2. Cf. Luke Timothy Johnson, 'Fragments of an Untidy Conversation: Theology and the Literary Diversity of the New Testament', *Biblical Theology: Problems and Perspectives* (ed. Steven J. Kraftchick, Charles D. Myers, Jr, and Ben C. Ollenburger; Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995) 276–89. See also the sage remarks by Maurice Wiles on the several senses of 'authority' which may be applied to appropriate uses of the Bible in the church. Of these, the notion of the Bible as 'binding authority', the 'directly probative employment of the Bible', he says, 'needs to be renounced. It is indefensible, and we ought to be grateful to the critical studies that have released us from its burden and not seek to be "entangled again with the yoke of bondage" (Gal. 5:1)' (Maurice Wiles, 'Scriptural Authority and Theological Construction: The Limitations of Narrative Interpretation', *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation* [ed. Garrett Green; Philadelphia, PN: Fortress, 1987] 42–58, 50).

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conversation since Gabler, we have come to a time when they can only blinker our understanding. First, the notion 'biblical theology', despite all the qualifications we have learned to make regarding it, in practice tends always to smuggle in a cognitivist model of religion (to use George Lindbeck's helpful typology),[14] privileging doctrine at the expense of life. Second, 'biblical theology' implicitly claims textual and historical warrants for propositions that in truth arise only out of continuing transactions between text and reader through many times and places, and it invites our complicity as historians in this masking of the source of authority. Whenever we hear the phrase, 'The Bible clearly teaches', in contemporary debates, we may be sure that this covert relocation of the warrant is taking place. Third, 'biblical theology' has functioned ideologically in the attempt to secure our own positions in the theological hierarchy, as the teachers of the teachers of the church. We have not done very well in that role, and we should give it up.

A second audience to which we are responsible is the intellectual community, conveniently represented by the university. In recent years we have seen a remarkable proliferation of interdisciplinary work in our field, so much so that if one glances at the program of an annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, one may feel quite overwhelmed. Of course, one may also feel that much of this work is experimental and that little is destined to endure, but that is no cause for concern. We need more experimentation, not less. What is more worrisome is that communication is mainly in one direction. We are eager to try out the latest movements – well, not really the latest; we are usually a decade or so behind – in literary criticism, sociology, ethnography, and the like. But there is hardly anyone on the other side who is interested enough in what we have to say to help us with the critical questions of limits and standards.[15] By all means we need to continue our experimentation, but above all we need to discover ways to enter into effective dialogue with scholars in other fields who can learn from us as we learn from them. If we succeed, that dialogue may also help us to engage our third and largest audience.[16]

That largest audience is, not to speak too grandly, the world. I mean specifically the *non-Christian* majority of the world, who have suddenly become our

14 George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post-Liberal Age* (Philadelphia, PN: Westminster, 1984) 16–18.

15 The surprising 'rediscovery' of certain biblical and religious questions among philosophers of culture like Derrida unfortunately provides more evidence of the failure than of the success of our communicative efforts across disciplinary boundaries.

16 How far this kind of dialogue is from the way NT scholars have mostly understood 'interdisciplinary work' is illustrated by Hans Hübner's boast that his 'disziplinenübergreifend' labors have included church history, systematic theology, Luther research, and OT exegesis (Hans Hübner, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990–5] I: 7).

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neighbors in ways earlier generations could scarcely have imagined. Learning to listen and to speak to that audience is the most exciting and certainly the most important challenge we will face in the present century. Obviously that audience is dauntingly varied. Its members range from militant representatives of traditional religions, through peoples whose traditions were never 'religious' in the ways defined by modern Western societies, to those who have leapt in one generation from 'religious' to 'secular' – not to mention all those who, like many of ourselves, uneasily hold together in their minds conflicting pictures of reality. Our mindset will have to be quite different from that which motivated the great Western missionary movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. We can be helped, however, by some of the successes of those movements. Among us are some who were nurtured in churches founded by those missionaries, and they bring to our conversation the experience of having lived always in an environment where the myths of Christendom did not apply. They have much to teach the rest of us.[17]

One of the things we may learn is that it is not necessarily the case that God wants all the world to be like us. That was a point St Paul grasped intuitively, but he thought that Peter did not get it (Gal 2.11–16), and neither have most of their followers since. We biblical scholars, I believe, have an important role to play in the urgently needed new dialogue between Christians and non-Christians. I think most of us have come to understand – as the best of the missionaries have understood – that conversion is not the measure of success of such a dialogue. Indeed, for real dialogue to proceed we need to abandon the arrogance of fideist hermeneutics, which insists that in order truly to understand our texts you must first convert. It is altogether possible to understand and to say no.[18] It is quite possible that these texts of the NT may speak very effectively to someone who will not ever become a Christian, and who may indeed teach us things about them to which we had not paid attention. Think only of Ghandi! We have many things to learn about these texts from people whose culture, whether 'religious' or 'secular', is different from our own. And precisely as critical scholars, we have things to say that may help those people to understand their own traditions and cultures in a

17 Among the growing number of essays reflecting on the obligations laid on biblical interpreters in a post-colonial world, see for example Heikki Räisänen *et al.*, *Reading the Bible in the Global Village* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000). SNTS enjoys a special connection with work going on in Africa after the Hammanskraal conference in 1999; for a sample of the extraordinary variety of hermeneutical strategies emerging in African contexts, see Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube, eds, *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

18 Cf. Charles Wood's sage remarks on theological hermeneutics: 'Important as it is to relate understanding and use, it is crucial not to identify them in such a way as to imply that to understand a text is to agree with it . . .' (Charles M. Wood, *The Formation of Christian Understanding: An Essay in Theological Hermeneutics* [Philadelphia, PN: Westminster, 1981]

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different way, and to participate in the ongoing debate about 'modernization' and 'globalization' in ways that will benefit all sides of the conversation.

I return now to the question with which I began: Why study the NT? There are excellent reasons, taking account of multiple audiences. The NT must be studied because it is part of the foundation of all Christian communities. It must be studied because it has become a pervasive element in the art, literature, and thought of large parts of human culture, and its influence has by no means come to an end, nor has it been confined to the West. It must be studied critically, because it has been abused as often as it has been used, by its devotees and by its opponents. It must be studied historically, because we cannot escape the stream of history, and when we pretend otherwise, we wreak damage on ourselves and others. It must be studied with a view toward the future, openly and, if I may use the word, humbly, because we do not possess the final word. As Hans Frei said so well, 'the notion of a right interpretation of the Bible is itself not meaningless, but it is eschatological'.[19] An echo of a more famous precursor, who said, 'For now we see a reflected puzzle, but then face to face; now I have some partial knowledge, but then I shall know as I am known' (1 Cor 13.1).

19 Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology* (ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher; New Haven, CT/London: Yale University, 1992) 56, 90.

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