

## The Bible and the Word of God

By Henry Hamann

So far in these lectures we have been concerned with erroneous ways of looking at and assessing the Bible, with movements away from a sound and appropriate view of it. The first was to the right, the second to the left. One movement is far more serious than the other. However, there is a more excellent way, which is the subject of this final lecture.

I shall begin with a theoretical statement, and the greater part of the lecture will be an exposition of that statement: *That the Bible is truly the Word of God cannot be given up without loss of the Christian faith.*

That the Bible, all of it, is the Word of God must be held together with the assertion that it is, all of it, the word of human beings. A certain analogy exists here between the Word of Scripture and the personal Word who is Jesus Christ. As Christ is God and man indivisibly associated in one person, so the Word of Scripture is both human and divine in an indissoluble unity. Everything about the Bible shows its humanity: the origin and genesis of the individual writings; the collection of the various and very different compositions into one definitive library; the transmission of the text of the various writings down through the centuries; and the translations from the original languages.

That the Bible is the Word of God must be held without falling into the mistake of making the Bible and the Word of God identical, as if the two expressions were completely conterminous - *Bible* conveying the same connotation as *Word of God*, and *Word of God* precisely the same connotation as *Bible*. As a matter of fact, *Word of God* is a far wider term than *Bible*. *Bible* is included in *Word of God*.

*Word of God* is applied repeatedly to the oral human statements about God, to those made by the many prophets in the Old Testament and by the apostles and others in the New. All the words of the prophets were, first of all, oral proclamations and these oral proclamations were truly the Word of God. Only a portion of these oral proclamations finally found their way into written form, and some of the prophets did not commit any of their spoken words to writing. The same is true of the New Testament. St. Paul praised the Thessalonians in the following terms : "And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you *heard* from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God" (1 Thess. 2:13; italics added) . What was true of St. Paul was true of the other apostles of Jesus Christ. Paul's letters represent only a very small portion of all he spoke in his preaching, teaching, admonishing, and advising. Most of the words that he spoke as the Word of God are not recoverable. This is even more the case with the other apostles, of whose words we have next to nothing.

*The Word of God* must also be used to describe the oral words of Jesus Christ himself, just as he is the personal Word. Some of his words have been transmitted in the Gospels, perhaps all the important ones. But the nonrecorded words must far exceed these. The writer of John 21:25 pointed to this fact in his highly exaggerated statement, "But there are also many other things which Jesus did ; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." More of the Word of God that is not part of the Bible!

We can go even further and declare that all proclamation of the gospel down the years by successors of the apostles and their successors down to our own age is properly designated as the Word of God. This includes every form in which this proclamation has taken place: speaking, signing, painting, sculpture, and architecture. Ministers should have the conviction every time they preach that they are proclaiming the Word of God. The spoken word can be as much the Word of God as the written word. Some words of Luther in the *Smalcald Articles* are worth hearing in this connection:

In these matters, which concern the external, spoken Word, we must hold firmly to the conviction that God gives no one his Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word which comes before. Thus we shall be protected from the enthusiasts - that is, from the spiritualists who boast that they possess the Spirit without and before the Word and who therefore judge, interpret, and twist the Scriptures or spoken Word according to their pleasure. Muenzer did this. . . . The papacy, too, is nothing but enthusiasm, for the pope boasts that "all laws are in the shrine of his heart," and he claims that whatever he decides and commands in his churches is spirit and law, even when it is above and contrary to the Scriptures or spoken Word.(1)

Occasionally one hears highly exaggerated statements to the effect that only the spoken Word is powerful, while the written Word is powerless and dead; that only when spoken does the Word come to life. To say this is to be insensitive to the nature of human language. I suppose that choice sections from the cantos of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, when declaimed or recited by a master reader or orator, would have a greater and more gripping effect on the average hearer than the same passages read by him or her. It is also true that if read aloud by a poor reader they would be hopelessly ruined. But the passages retain their power to excite the imagination and arouse wonderment and admiration even when read silently. Similarly, the gospel is just as much the Word of God when read from the Bible as it is when it is spoken.

There is a unity about all these forms of the Word of God. I should like to let the late Dr. Hermann Sasse, a great scholar in many fields of theology and a personal friend for many years, speak on this point.

"The Word of the Lord will stand for ever." It belongs to the nature of God's Word in contrast to human words that it cannot perish. The Word of God in creation, each of these words, is living and powerful even today. The word spoken by God before there was a human ear to hear is identical with the word later recorded in writing. The word that came to a prophet in a definite hour of history remains and is identical with the word written in Scripture, as it is identical with the word read from Scripture and proclaimed in the sermon according to Luther's rule: "*Verbum Dei praedicatum est Verbum Dei*" ("The Word of God preached is the Word of God"). One must always keep in mind that the Word - or a particular word - exists in various forms: in the heart of God, going out of his mouth, coming to the prophet, heard by him, proclaimed by him, written in Scripture, read learned, remembered, translated, accompanying the dying soul - always the same powerful and living word.(2)

Granted the unity of the word of Scripture with all the other forms of the Word of God, the Scripture is still the Word of God in a special way which makes it characteristically different

from the other forms. It is permanent, approachable, readily available, and as the permanent form of the word of the prophets, Jesus Christ, and the apostles, it is the source and authoritative norm of all preaching and teaching in the church of God. This definition needs some clarification.

The heart of the biblical revelation is the history of God's great acts for the salvation of human beings. Up to a point it is a recital of God's involvement in the course of history to bring about his saving plans and purposes. In the Old Testament special importance attaches to the deliverance of the people of Israel from Egypt, God's guidance of them through the desert, and his final settling of them in the land of Palestine. This great act of God is referred to repeatedly in subsequent literature, in the Psalms and the various prophetic writings. The whole event was kept alive by the Passover festival and the customs which grew up around it, right up to the time of the coming of Jesus Christ. In Christ a great, new, and final act of God for humankind was enacted. "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:19). The incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ dominate the New Testament writings as the Exodus does those of the Old. The whole situation is quite unlike other religions which have been fixed in writing, which have to do with the transmission of spiritual wisdom, teachings, and doctrines - all of which are claimed to be eternally true. Christianity and the religion of the people of God in the Old Testament are not like this at all, although there are, of course, these elements there as well. The Christian faith is based on and rooted in a history. Take that away, and there is nothing left in of the faith and in the Bible that you could not find elsewhere. This fact about the Christian faith has led some to see the revelation in the history itself, in God's acts themselves.

Such a view falls into a different error. As a matter of fact, there is nothing about the history itself, in either the Old or New Testaments, which is in any way obviously revelatory. There is nothing about the history of salvation as we see it in the Bible which by itself would demonstrate that in this particular history God acted in a special way for human beings, but not in all the rest of the mighty historical canvas involving many great nations, living, working, and dying over a period of 6000 years. Other nations have sprung from insignificant beginnings and within a few years attained a power and influence which Israel in the Old Testament never even began to approach. Other people besides Jesus of Nazareth have been unjustly crucified or condemned to other deaths just as cruel and inhuman. What is there about this death which is so special? What separates, from a purely historical perspective, Jesus from Socrates? Revelation, however, does not attach to God's deeds themselves or to the history in itself. Revelation occurs when God speaks to the deed. Revelation of God is the speaking of God. Word attached to the history - this is the decisive factor.

The Bible is the permanent record of God's speaking to these great acts of his. The spoken Word which reveals God's hand and activity in the historical events of the past, that Word is kept and preserved as the same Word by the Scriptures, the written Word of God. The spoken words of the prophets as they proclaimed the Word of God are no longer available to us. Neither are the spoken words of the apostle or of Jesus himself. Even the historical Jesus Christ, the person through whom God has spoken in a final, definitive way, is not directly approachable by us. The Word of the Scripture, in short, is the permanent "abstract" of the Word of God spoken in their day by the people of God of the Old and New

Testaments: Moses, the prophets, psalmists, apostles, evangelists, and our Lord Jesus Christ himself. As such it is the original Word of God. No one can penetrate behind it to something still more original, still more basic and fundamental, still closer to its source, God himself. Neither liturgy, nor tradition, can take the place of the Scriptures as the original Word of God. Accordingly, although identifying the Bible and Word of God as conterminous fails to do justice to the many forms of the Word of God, the Bible is the Word of God in a very special sense. It is therefore also the source and norm of all teaching and preaching.

The last of the Lutheran confessional writings, the *Formula of Concord*, states the position of the Scriptures as the Word of God in the following terms:

We believe, teach, and confess that the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged . . . .

Other writings of ancient and modern teachers, whatever their names, should not be put on a par with Holy Scripture. Every single one of them should be subordinated to the Scriptures and should be received in no other way and no further than as witnesses to the fashion in which the doctrine of the prophets and apostles were preserved in post-apostolic times.(3)

These words do not state, as they might be taken to do, that the words written and spoken by pastors and teachers of the church and others speaking as Christians are not truly the Word of God, but something less than Word of God. What the Formula is saying is that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God. It is the source and norm. Sermons, exhortations, essays, and other productions by men and women of the church are the Word of God only in so far as they are in keeping with the teaching of the Bible. For authority, true authority, we have to go beyond them to the Scriptures. All teachers and teachings in the church can be criticized and set right in a way that the Bible cannot be. It is possible that some great teacher can present a biblical truth more sharply and more incisively than the Bible itself does - for instance, Luther probably expresses the biblical view of human sin more profoundly than does the Bible itself. But his statements do not for that reason displace the biblical statements-they are rather to be assessed as the Word of God by the biblical norm.

In all this the Bible is the witness of the Spirit to Christ. As the Bible itself asserts in a number of places, we speak rightly of the Scriptures as inspired. Every true witness to Christ - by whomsoever given - is also the witness of his Spirit. Jesus himself unites the witness of his apostles and the witness of the Spirit in John 15:26-27, and this is insisted on also in other places, as in 2 Cor. 5:20. So also the written witness of the people of God which we have in the Bible is the witness of the Spirit. This inspiration extends over the whole of what is the Scriptures. Inspiration is verbal, for we think and speak in words. There is no other possible kind of inspiration of verbal material.

That the Bible is the Word of God in the way I have now outlined cannot be given up without loss of the Christian faith. Imagine the situation if the words of Jesus and the apostles had not been committed to writing. The oral transmission of these things down the years by word of mouth would by this time have transformed them beyond recognition. The Gospel of Thomas is only one indication of what we could expect. The apocryphal gospels show serious perversions of the nature and character of Christ Jesus in the popular imagination within a few centuries. Without the protection of a written Word of God, the imagination, whims, and vagaries of the human mind, together with its speculations, wishes,

and desires would have left us with a multitude of conflicting words, sayings, assertions, and teachings through which no mind could penetrate to the original. Heaven knows, we have enough confusion as it is in theology. Not only common people but also trained theologians are hard-put to find their way through it all. Dr. Sasse had a fine comparison for such a state of affairs. He used to liken tradition where there is still a written Word to a balloon firmly anchored to the ground. It might be carried here and there by the wind, it might go through some violent gyrations, but it can't get too far away. The correction and stability offered by the Bible is always there. The case is far different with a balloon unattached and unanchored. There is absolutely no check to its movements. The winds carry it far away from the place where it left the ground, and there is no assurance that it will ever see the place again. So is tradition without a written Word of God.

The question is sure to be asked at this point, What is the difference between your position on the Bible as the Word of God and the position taken by fundamentalism? There is a difference, but it must first of all be granted that this position shares a number of convictions with fundamentalism. Both positions would maintain that the Bible is in all its parts the Word of God; that the Bible has unity; that it is the authoritative source and norm of faith and morals; that it is verbally inspired; that it calls for faith in certain propositions as well as faith in a person. But the differences between fundamentalism as I have described it and what I have just presented are there as well.

The first and most important difference, I should say, lies in the relation between all the incidental aspects and features of this library of books and the central Christian gospel. The tendency in fundamentalism is to see in all the many assertions many individual truths, all of which are valuable in themselves, all of them important, all of them the revealed Word of God, and (sometimes) all of them of more or less equal importance as the Word of God. The Bible becomes something like a codex of legal paragraphs, each of which must be upheld for fear of losing the whole. From the fundamentalistic point of view, for instance, it is impossible to prove a Seventh Day Adventist missionary wrong who insists on keeping the Sabbath and who refuses to allow his New Guinea converts to eat pork, in spite of the fact that pork is about the only animal protein a New Guinean villager is ever likely to eat. The regulation and the prohibition are there in the Old Testament, black on white, as clearly stated as possible. The view of the Bible presented here sees the whole Bible as related to its center, the gospel of Jesus Christ and God's work in him. "You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me" (John 5:39). True study of the Scriptures is study that never loses sight of the Christ of whom the Scriptures treat, and without whom they would have no particular value. With such a view of Scripture it is comparatively easy to argue the case of the Sabbath and pork.

Secondly, it is but an extension of the point of view just mentioned to see the gospel of Jesus Christ as a determining principle of Scriptural interpretation. This claim must be understood correctly. It does not suggest that the doctrine of justification by faith or the gospel is that from which all Christian teaching may be deduced. What it does say is that Scripture cannot teach anywhere what runs counter to its central teaching, the Gospel. It is a negative norm, if I may put it that way, not a positive norm. No one could deduce the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper from the doctrine of justification by faith, but it is also quite obvious that they are completely in harmony with that teaching. Both are derived from specific passages. On the other hand, the Gospel does indicate in various ways what the sacraments *cannot* be, and how they should *not* be regarded. So in many instances

the gospel of Jesus Christ keeps an expositor from adopting some explanation of a certain passage which is plainly inconsistent with the gospel. The inspiration of Scripture, the truthfulness of God, and the consistency he must show in all his acts give us the confidence that nothing in Scripture will be or can be contrary to or contradict what that same Scripture declares to be its center and purpose.

A further difference between fundamentalism and the stance being defended today is seen in the divergent ways in which both think and speak of the matter of inerrancy. Fundamentalists feel threatened by every claimed or apparent error and discrepancy in the sacred text. They write books to explain away difficulties. Whether there was one donkey or two for Jesus to make use of in his entry into Jerusalem before his passion is a matter of critical urgency. Other examples were given in the first lecture. These aspects of the Bible are interesting matters for themselves but are not immediately related to inerrancy, authority, or reliability. I shall let the *Theses of Agreement*, which forms part of the basis of union for the Lutheran Church of Australia, speak on this matter:

With the whole true Church of God we confess the Bible to be the inerrant Word of God. This inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures cannot be seen with human eyes, nor can it be proved to human reason; it is an article of faith, a belief in something that is hidden and not obvious. We believe that the Scriptures are the Word of God and therefore inerrant. The term 'inerrancy' has no reference to the variant readings found in the extant textual sources because of copyists' errors or deliberate alterations; neither does it imply an absolute verbal accuracy in quotations and in parallel accounts, such absolute uniformity evidently not having been part of God's design. We believe that the holy writers, whom God used, retained the distinctive features of their personalities (language and terminology, literary methods, conditions of life, knowledge of nature and history as apart from direct revelation and prophecy). God made use of them in such a manner that even that which human reason might call a deficiency in Holy Scripture must serve the divine purpose. Furthermore, it pleased the Holy Ghost to employ authors possessing various gifts for writing on the same subject. How in such cases it is possible that differing accounts of the same event or the same saying are the true and inerrant report of one and the same fact cannot and need not always be shown by rational harmonization.

These words could be misunderstood, as though an endeavor were being made to speak of inerrancy on two different levels, with the level of faith being set beyond the reach of criticism. In 1972 the Lutheran Church of Australia attempted to meet such criticism of the Theses, and this endeavor will be reported in detail below. For the present it is necessary to point out the truth that while proof for the Word is not historically possible, it is historically possible to disprove its assertions. Take the case of the resurrection. No historical proof for this is really possible, for we are not dealing with a strictly historical occurrence like the resuscitation of a corpse, the coming back to this life and mode of existence of one who has died. We are dealing rather with the entry of one who has died into a new and spiritual mode of existence which no other human being has experienced. But disproof of the resurrection is logically thinkable. For instance, if Caiaphas, upon hearing the report from the early Christians that Jesus of Nazareth had risen, had gone to the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea and found there a newly deposited body, he would have had every right to declare that Jesus of Nazareth did not rise. This, by the way, is the importance of the report of the empty tomb in the apostolic witness to the resurrection of Jesus. Inerrancy cannot be proved. It is a matter of faith, not demonstration, as the *Theses of Agreement* declare. But, logically speaking, inerrancy could be disproved if assertion after assertion in the Scriptures

could be shown to be mistaken and false. Defense of inerrancy in certain directions is therefore necessary and to the point. Pinnock is basically on the right path when he writes in his book *Biblical Revelation- The Foundation of Christian Theology*:

Fuller argues that the doctrinal verses teaching inspiration do not require so broad a view, but teach only inerrancy in *revelational matters*. Fuller proposes this as only a "slight corrective" to Warfield, with considerable advantages. It leaves revelational matters (those which for the most part, he claims, lie outside empirical investigation) safe and secure, while difficulties affect only areas where historical control is possible. Here lies the difficulty. The claim that Scripture does *not* err in those places where it may not be tested is meaningless if it *does* err in those places where it can! The extent to which the verifiable portions of Scripture are fallacious is the degree to which the *whole* of Scripture is discredited. Wherever faith and knowledge are opposed like this, faith suffers. The factual assertions of Scripture are bound up with the theological affirmations (e.g., Matt. 12:41). The theological truth is discredited to the extent that the factual material is erroneous.

In basic agreement with this statement the Lutheran Church of Australia in 1972 adopted an explanatory statement on the matter of inerrancy as presented in the *Theses of Agreement*. It insisted on the necessity of opposing the idea of "errors" in the Bible, and at the same time pointed to inerrancy again as a matter of faith and not of logical demonstration. Its seven condemnations - although that term is not used - show particularly clearly the point that is at present being made.

Some ways of speaking or teaching in the matter of inerrancy which are contrary to the sound doctrine of the Scriptures and of the Theses of Agreement are herewith specified:

1. to speak of "errors" in the Holy Scripture ;
2. to hold that what according to clear biblical statements "actually is or actually happened" may be regarded as what actually is *not* or actually does *not* happen ;
3. to adopt uncritically and to propagate all the claims of historical criticism which often rest on or lead to an unbiblical scepticism as to the historical bases of the Christian faith ;
4. to use modern knowledge as a means to judge any biblical statement and attack the authority of Scripture ;
5. to make faith in the inerrancy of Scripture in any way depend on the human certainty attained by rational argument and demonstration ;
6. to regard all statements of the Scripture as being of equal value and importance ;
7. to treat the Bible in such a way as though its divine authority rendered historical investigation unimportant or irrelevant.(4)

Sound teaching on inerrancy must do justice to both facts developed in these lectures: (1) The actual state of the biblical texts which readers are presented with, and the claims of the Scripture about itself, which include, of course, the assertions of our Lord and his apostles.

Although the actual texts with which we are confronted do cause difficulties of various kinds, some of them impinging on the subject of inerrancy, at least two observations of

importance can be made concerning this class of difficulty. The first is that there are not as many difficulties as is often suggested. A certain class of scholars sees nothing but contradictions of all kinds - they are the counterparts of the rank fundamentalists who see none. When, for instance, an eminent scholar traces the divisions in churches of our day back to the lack of unity of teaching in the biblical writers, he can do this only by magnifying minute variations of theological expression into major differences in the understanding of the gospel. Molehills are made into mountains. Even a modicum of willingness to see harmony where possible between conflicting accounts will remove a considerable number of the traditional and other difficulties that may be encountered.

The second observation is that some of the discrepancies are really of no consequence, and it is only lack of flexibility of mind which would even think that inerrancy is threatened. There are various sayings of Jesus and also a number of stories where the central concern is clear as clear could be, but where there is irreconcilable disagreement way out on the periphery. For example, a famous word of Jesus is transmitted in two quite different ways. Matthew 5:40 reads: "And if any one would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well." But Luke renders this as follows: "And from him who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt" (6:29). To suggest that Jesus spoke the sentence in both ways during his ministry is to be ridiculous. Luke has probably changed the sentence for the benefit of his Gentile readers. But the meaning is precisely the same. There is a formal discrepancy in the actual wording, but complete agreement in what is really said. I hold that inerrancy is not affected by such matters. Similarly, as mentioned earlier, Matthew has two donkeys in the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, while the other evangelists have one. To deny that there ever was an entry of Jesus before his end would indeed be an attack on the inerrancy of the Scripture-clear biblical statements regarding what happened would be made into statements of what did not happen. But the whole episode remains precisely the same no matter how many donkeys were involved. Very many so-called discrepancies can be considered to be such only on a peripheral level.

There are probably gray areas where scholars who are committed to biblical inerrancy differ as to whether a certain position is an attack on inerrancy or not. Some such scholars might be able to live with the view that Second Peter is both pseudonymous and canonical, while others would feel compelled to assert Petrine authorship in some sense or else cease to regard the letter as part of the New Testament. In cases like this, the church must be willing to put up with differences of judgment, putting the best construction upon scholars' opinions or convictions, so long as it is clear from their whole work that they are submissive to the Word of God and the authority of Scripture.

Therefore, if the actual facts of the texts and the biblical claim to inerrancy are kept in proper tension, nothing is lost and much is gained. The biggest gain will be that all can see the church to be honest and truthful, with scholars who are both impelled by convictions of faith and alert to what the Bible actually says as well as refusing to try and make it say what they might like it to say.

The view of the Bible as the Word of God presented here also gives philosophy or human reason its proper place in relation to the Bible. On the negative side, it has already been stated that human reason must be rejected as a source or norm of the Christian religion or its theology. To make the circle of argument complete it is necessary to say something of the positive contribution of human reason to a sound use of the Bible.

Reason is necessary as the means to understand what the Scripture says and to present what it has to say for the understanding of people. God gave his Word (and still gives it through the Scriptures) in human words. The Word of God is written and is spoken in all the logic of human language. Speech is a complicated means of communication. Its logic has been thoroughly investigated in language after language. Most of us know this logic in our mother tongue in a practical way, but a real logic, a real exercise of human reason is going on all the time. So the Bible makes use of the logic of language, and of almost all the kinds of logical argumentation the human mind uses. To understand the Word of God in the Bible and comprehend all the various kinds of literary forms made use of there, human reason and logic are absolutely necessary. All of us, but especially those who teach exegesis and homiletics, know how difficult most people find it to really understand and comprehend a given piece of prose literature or poetry. The same use of human reason is needed to convey the message of the Bible in a clear, understandable, attractive, and interesting way to others, whether by preaching, teaching, or conversation.

A good case could be made, further, for the value of philosophy as a *praeparatio evangelii*, as a preparation for the gospel. Philosophy can serve the negative function of showing how all attempts of the human mind to attain to the final truth about God, life, meaning, and salvation (whether these attempts take the purely logical path, or the ethical, or the mystical) finally lead to the conclusion that the solution is impossible; that the final answer is *ignoramus et ignorabimus*, we don't know and we never shall. We need a revelation from God; we need the God who speaks. In this way, philosophy plays the same role as the law of God in preparing human beings for the message of the gospel.

This use of reason is often described as *ancillary* in order to mark its nature as serving something greater, the Word itself. The use of reason that I have rejected for its part is called the *magisterial* use of reason, a claim that reason is master and has the right to determine what is right and wrong, good and bad, true and false.

I should like to summarize what has been presented by means of various expositions of a well-known biblical passage. The three interpretations more or less characterize the three views of the Bible that have been considered in these chapters. The three interpretations will follow the order of the lectures. So we shall have, first, the fundamentalistic interpretation, then, the one determined by philosophy, and, finally, that which is in accord with what I have argued in these chapters.

The biblical passage I have in mind is that dealing with the Fall, Genesis 3. Fundamentalists normally take the whole story literally. There was a *real* garden, with a *real* snake, *real* trees of life and of the knowledge of good and evil. There was a *real* conversation between a snake (or the devil making use of a snake) and Eve. Not only did Adam and Eve fall grievously into sin, leaving the holy state in which God had created them, but the whole happening took place in precisely the way in which it is described in Genesis.

Now the interpreter who allows philosophy to determine his reading of the story could take the line followed by E. B. Redlich:

The stories of the Creation and the Fall are also legends explaining the origin of customs and institutions; that is to say, they are aetiological legends. In these two dramatic stories the Hebrews found answers to many questions dealing with human life and interests. When were clothes first worn? Why are serpents hated by man? Why do they

crawl along the ground? Why is man mortal? And in particular, questions relating to sex: What causes sexual attraction? When was marriage instituted? Why is woman subservient to man? Why is birth painful? (5)

A philosophical commentator may take a different line, one that is met with very commonly in theological works. The story in Genesis 3 then becomes a myth or parable of the human situation. Adam and Eve represent all people. The word *Adam* means man, Eve is Hebrew *chayyah*, "life"; she is the mother. The story depicts most truly the root of evil which is in us all. We all, like Adam and Eve, come into temptations which we cannot resist and so fall into sin. Thus there is no history in the event of Genesis 3, no event at the beginning of the human race with catastrophic effects. Professor Alan Richardson puts the case with all possible clarity:

The time-element in the myths of Creation and Fall (as in all the biblical myths) must be discounted: it is not that *once* (in 4004 B.C. - or a hundred thousand years ago) God created man perfect and then he fell from grace. God is eternally Creator; he is eternally making man and holding him in being and seeing that his handiwork is good (Gen. 1:31). And just as creation is an eternal activity, so the "Fall" is an ingredient of every moment of human life; man is at every moment "falling," putting himself in the centre, rebelling against the will of God. Adam is Everyman. (6)

The third position taken in these lectures would assert the actuality, but would not insist on the literal understanding of the story. So there *was* a Creation and a Fall, not merely continual creating of human beings and continual falling. God *did* create humanity good, as Genesis 1 distinctly states, for nothing that God creates is evil. Evil is *not* part of the created human nature, however certainly it has corrupted that nature. But there *was* a catastrophe in the history of the human race which affected the whole of it. The truth is put in the form of a fictitious tale, but it sets forth actual truth. What is declared to have happened, that the race created good became sinful, truly happened. In setting this forth, the writer made use of material well known to his readers. If he had been writing among the Eskimos, the tale would have looked different, with a polar bear and fish and a forbidden hole in the ice taking the place of the scene we know so well in Genesis. But the happening depicted would still be the same. It can be demonstrated that the text of Genesis 3 itself gives good cause and reason for taking it to be a fictitious tale; like many of the parables of Jesus, its meaning has to be seen underlying the surface presentation.

It should be noted that, with this final interpretation, the underlying truth - the nature and the origin of sin - remains precisely the same as for the fundamentalist. It would be unreasonable and unjust for a fundamentalist to hold that this sort of interpretation of the Fall is in any way an attack on the Bible or its authority. It is an interpretation which actually deals more accurately with the literary form at hand.

### Chapter 3 footnotes

1. *The Book of Concord*, Theodore G. Tappert, trans. and ed. (Muhlenberg, 1959) , p. 312.
2. Hermann Sasse, Comments on the Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (LCMS) , A Study Document on Revelation, Inspiration, Inerrancy, pp. 8-9.
3. *The Book of Concord*, pp. 464-465.
4. Pinnock, p. 79.
5. E. B. Redlich, *The Early Traditions of Genesis* (Duckworth, 1950), pp. 74-75.
6. *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* (Macmillan, 1961), p. 14.