Confessional Allegiance and Historical Method: Conflicting Accountabilities?

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1. Confessional allegiance and historical method could not begin to conflict, as they do, if they did not already have so much in common: namely, a common preoccupation with the historical. Indeed, confessional allegiance—that is, Christian faith—not only focuses upon history as its object but proceeds from history as its basis, in the life and death of Jesus the Christ.

2. Still, that historical life and death are at the same time so contrary to ordinary history as to break through the bounds of conventional historiography—and at three points, at least.

2a. What faith asserts is that these events, the life and death of Jesus the Christ, presented not merely as happenings to be acknowledged but as a personal promise of lasting life to be taken advantage of, determine our own existence ultimately and permanently—one way or the other. These events accomplish all that, even though we who are so drastically affected by them had nothing to do with the occurrence of that life and death and cannot explain why our very existence should depend on just this event rather than on some other ones, let alone why the existence of us all should depend on any event which happened only once and never again. By contrast, the kind of explaining which historians ordinarily do refuses passionately to base such sweeping results on such an apparently arbitrary, accidental,

contingent incident. The most that critical historians might concede to such a contingent incident is that it is extraordinarily revealing, but revealing only of some old truth which all along has been true anyway, true necessarily. To claim instead that the truth in question is true at all only because it came true in this humble incident, to claim in other words that this contingency actualized a decision about the human race in which the race itself had no part, no causal responsibility—such a historic claim offends, understandably, any sober historical reason, as it did Lessing's.

2b. Historical skepticism, an obligatory stance for the historian, boggles at New Testament reports of Jesus' resurrection. And why? Not because the reports lack historical evidence but because of what the critical historian quite reasonably presupposes about human existence, namely, that basically it is always and everywhere the same—what Dilthey called the historian's "principle of analogy." Yet it is precisely at the point of this presupposition about human sameness that historical doubt conflicts with Christian faith in Jesus' resurrection—or better, conflicts with Christian faith in the resurrected Jesus himself. And why? Not because Christian faith begins with a different preconception about the nature of historical evidence nor because it begins with a different preconception of what is humanly possible but rather because it begins with trusting the promise of the resurrected Jesus himself, the promise he makes for our own new life. Trusting that, first of all, faith then adjusts its preconceptions about what is humanly possible and historically reliable accordingly.

2c. A third point at which Christian faith might conflict with historical method in their respective understandings of Jesus Christ is the question, How can he, though long past, still be present? Christian faith has no reason to minimize that Jesus' life and death are bygone and past and that with each new

intervening generation he recedes farther into a time that is no longer our own. Indeed, that very limitation only underscores what Christian faith calls Christ's "humiliation," his sharing a common human fate with the rest of us, including the circumstance of our widening separation from our successors. But if that is so, then the fact that he is temporally removed from us, as all of us will be from our own successors, is less important than the larger truth that also merges at just this point. Evidently it is the characteristic style of this Jesus Christ to share the same humbling temporal conditions, the same time-space, with the rest of us transitory mortals. And so he does, not of course by a second incarnation but also not from the safe distance of some "super-history" or "primal history" or "inner history" but by His still keeping company with us here and now in His own Spirit through the media of Word and Sacraments.

3. Ironically, confessional allegiance might conflict with historical method because it credits historical change with even more significance than many a historicist might be willing to do. For the Lutheran confessors, for instance, not only do biblical injunctions like those concerning women's head-coverings lose their force because of changing times; not only do new historical circumstances warrant new confessional witness; not only do changes in church life require that practices which once might have been a matter of indifference should now become a matter of confessional protest. That much respect for historical change might be expected of Christians and historicists alike. But it is something else to claim, as the Lutheran confessors do, that the purpose for which God conducts history the way God does itself undergoes change—e.g., that God alters the historical expectations God has of God's own Law; or that God's own self has a change of heart as a result of God's historical interaction with God's human creatures; or that

God risks God's own reputation, God's glory, upon the vicissitudes and fickleness of God's people. Perhaps the most extreme identification of God with historical change comes with the confessional claim, quoting from Luther, that the second person of the Trinity, as human "is 1543 years old this year." Dorothy Sayers had much the same thing in mind when she said, "Jesus Christ is the only god who has a date in history." By contrast scientific historians confine their datings to the ages of people and periods and other such *finita* and are not about to risk dating the deity.

4. Another point at which confessional allegiance and historical method may conflict is at the question, How does history come true? For the Lutheran confessors, the answer to that question would require a prior distinction between two kinds of history, the history of God's law and the history of God's promises. Not that these two histories are separable in time and space or even that they are explicitly distinguished in Scripture. Presumably the Scriptural accounts did not need to distinguish law and promise outright, seeing that Scripture has them in the right balance and coordination (*ordo, ratio*) to begin with. The reason the extra-biblical interpreter has to distinguish these two very different historical strands is that he, because of his built-in legalistic prejudice (*opinio legis*) tends to collapse their difference, de-radicalizing the newness of the promise and elevating the law to supremacy, with the unbiblical result that the promise is lost and the law itself is reduced to but a shadow of itself. Only when the promise is perceived in its distinctiveness from the law can we enjoy its native biblical preeminence, with the additional result that only then can the law too come into its prophetic intensity. Distinguishing law and promise is not an end in itself but is an exegetical prerequisite for doing justice to their original biblical relationship—i.e., if biblical history is to be read

Christianly, which is to say radically.

But given such a distinguishing between Scripture's legal history and its promissory history, we return to the question: how does biblical history come true? Answer: In the case of God's law, the judgments it makes about us would be true whether we believed them or not. In fact, even when we disbelieve them, our very disbelief only corroborates their evaluation of us all the more. In the case of the promises, on the other hand, what they say of us does not come true unless we trust then. Not that believing makes it so in some wish-fulfilling sense. But what the promises offer never gets received, enjoyed, therefore never really given, until and unless the promises are believed.

Similarly, the biblical record of the law's past history, the accounts of its previous successes and failures, is of course highly useful to us for our "learning," our "instruction in righteousness," etc. In his own secular way Santayana knew something of that nomological function of history when he warned that "he who ignores history is doomed to repeat it." By contrast, however, the history of how God kept His promises in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ– that history is not merely *exemplum* but is rather a new kind of history without which the promises not only would not be revealed but without which the promises would not have come true–in other words, without which Christians would not at all be what they confess themselves in Christ to be. So in the case of the promissory history, if it isn't believed it isn't true. But this mode of historical knowing is hardly characteristic of scientific historiography.

5. If not in outright conflict with, then at least in contrast to, that sort of historical method which seeks to know the historical past only for its own sake–and why shouldn't it?– confessional allegiance on the other hand, Christian faith, is

disposed to know its history in order (as the Lutheran confessors said) to put it to "use," rather than let it go to waste. Especially is this so, of course, in the case of the *historia* of Jesus Christ: he should be so used as not to be allowed to have "died in vain." The chief function of all theology, and indeed of faith itself, is to render Jesus Christ "necessary." But this "utilization," this "necessitating" of history applies by extension to all biblical history, as it is discovered to "testify of Me." Consequently it isn't only *people* who are to be "saved," much less merely their souls, but so are God's historic *works*, including God's law. Yet, the only way to salvage all that biblical history is by letting God's historic promises be actualized, and how else is that except *sola fide*? Faith is how God's history proceeds to be put to use. Without that faith, that "confessional allegiance," the history becomes "worthless," *inutile*.

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