

True to the Bible - Why?

Lecture given at the 50th anniversary of the
International Council of Christian Churches at Amsterdam, 1998
by Bernhard Kaiser

There is no doubt: we are living in a pluralist age. Pluralism means that there is no absolute truth in man's mind or mouth. Everybody may have elements of truth. And everybody may express them. A pluralist would perhaps agree that truth can be there, but truth is not accessible for man, man cannot conceive it by his limited mind, he cannot express it with his poor and relative words. Thus, truth may be a simple idea, but not reality. Such an idea has no value. The nihilist goes still further. He *denies* the existence of truth at all. Neither can a sentence or a proposition, be justified. In his book on *Pluralism as a Pattern of Knowledge*, the German philosopher Helmut F. Spinner says: There is no fundament of knowledge ("Es gibt kein Fundament der Erkenntnis", S. 48.).

In fact, if man looks around, he has nothing where he can rely upon. Rationalism and empirism are the two great traditions of thought in the occident. Rationalism was the philosophy of Plato and Descartes. It maintains that man by his reason is able to recognize truth. But it cannot be proved. And empirism – the philosophy of Hobbes and Locke and the positivists and materialists, which maintains that man by his senses is able to recognize truth – cannot be proved either. Kant, in the 1780es, has tried to combine both. But he had to admit, that he could not recognize the object of knowledge itself, the *Ding an sich*, the thing itself, but only as far as he was able to perceive it. Thus, truth since then appeared to be always subjective.

Modern man finds himself in an awkward situation: he has no reason to believe that there is truth, although he is longing for truth. Modern pluralism has made a virtue of necessity: It teaches: It's true, that there is no truth. So the competition of religions and world-views is open. Man can believe whatever he wants, but what he is forbidden to do is to claim that he has the truth and oblige others to believe it.

All that has affected us also as we read the Bible. The Bible as an object of knowledge according to Kant is always understood in a subjective way, such as it *appears* to each of us. So we have become confessional pluralists and do not believe, that truth really is in our mind and upon our lips. We may almost confess inerrancy of the Bible, but at the same time accept different and perhaps contradicting ways to understand it. It seems as if there were not any hope for truth in our confessing and preaching.

That's the frontline where we actually stand as bible-believing Christians.

Do we have any reason to believe in the bible, or is it simply our religious self-consciousness - as Schleiermacher put it - which leads us to our position? Or is it our psychological disposition which we have been accustomed to during infancy? Or is it fear, fear to lose our well framed world-view, its security, its pleasantness, its functionality, which leads us to an irrational commitment to the Bible? Let us look at the scriptures. I am going to explain the reasons we can find.

1. God has revealed Himself

Revelation means: the personal God, who is invisible for man because man is a sinner, has made himself known.

If we look around in the world of religions, we can find many claims that a god, a goddess or a non-defined divine being has manifested itself. That a god has spoken through individual men like Mohammed or other so-called prophets is a common claim in the sphere of religion. May be also, that a supernatural being manifests itself in powerful signs and wonders. But nowhere else do you find the biblical concept of revelation. It is unique. How is it? Revelation according to the scripture comes to us upon two legs: history and scriptures. Let me explain that.

1.1. History

By history, I mean that God has done particular things *in* history. We cannot say that the whole of history, history in its entirety, is revelation. That is what for example W. Panenberg and K. Rahner maintain. But they have to deal with the problem that the specific christian claim of uniqueness and truth cannot be maintained any longer.

The Bible reports history, by which God has revealed himself. That is why it is called *redemptive history*, *Heilsgeschichte*, *historia revelationis*. It is the history of his elect people, the people of Israel and its forefathers, which leads to Christ and his apostles. In him, we find the culmination point of that particular history.

Nevertheless, redemptive history has taken place *here on earth*, in the context of the so-called secular history. That's why we can calculate the date of the exodus, the date of David's reign, the date of the exile, the date of the crucifixion of Christ and so on. We can find the footsteps of that history in archaeology, and, sometimes non-israelitic sources speak about persons known only through the Bible.

Furthermore, it is most important that *God has saved us* through historical acts. Salvation is not only the fruit of an attitude which God has towards man. It is not a mere idea. Forgiveness of sin does not merely mean that God excuses our sins. No, he expiates them through the blood of his son. Forgiveness is a fact in history.

You will remember, too, how Pauls stresses the historicity of the resurrection, taking for granted what was known to all Israel, that Christ had physically died on the cross. If Christ has not risen, he argues, we are still in our sins, we are lost. In Christ's resurrection, we have the deliverance from sin. So, forgiveness, deliverance an eternal life are not real in our consciousness, but in outward, historical facts.

This should lead us to a revision of our soteriological concepts. We are post-kantians: We consider things to be true only as far as we perceive them. By our perception, we make truth, as if we were the creators of truth. In the same way, we are unable to believe, that we have been saved *in Christ*; we are accustomed to put our salvation at the day when we had a strong religious experience with the Bible or with other Christians. But that is just false. On the contrary, history which God has made, is withstanding our subjectivism, our experiences, our blurred consciousness (Bewußtsein).

However, redemptive history does not fit in a positivist, or, we may also say, in a historicist concept of history. Positivism was a movement in the second half of the nineteenth century. It considers only the visible world to be real and denies the existence of God. Consequently, it explains historical events only by immanent factors. Whenever something happens, it has, according to positivism, its visible or at least calculable cause. History is an immanent process. Positivism cannot accept, that a personal God is operating in this world in a special way, that a personal God has, for example, divided the Red

Sea during the exodus or has made Christ to rise from the dead. That is a preconceived opinion upon what history can be. It is, on the contrary, not absurd to say that God, the creator, can work miracles or has worked miracles. If he is creator, he can do that. History, then, as it belongs to the created world, is open for the creator, to do extraordinary things in the visible world according to his will.

1.2. Scripture

Revelation cannot be limited to historical events only. Although they are most important, revelation includes more. The other leg, upon which revelation is walking, are the Scriptures.

1.2.1. The scriptures *communicate* what God has done

Historical events are unique. David has not appeared again on the stage of history to give us his psalms again, Christ has come and died once for all and risen again. But also Cesar Augustus, William from Orange, Napoleon and other historical persons have not appeared again. They are all unique from the standpoint of history. If it is not written down what a person has done, he will fall in oblivion in the course of time. So, there is a *temporal gap* between Christ's time and our time. That belongs to history. And this gap must be bridged.

But there is still another problem: Christ lived in Palestine. We are living in Europe or elsewhere in the world. There is, too, a *geographical gap*, which must be bridged. So, a means is necessary to make known to the whole world, what God has done. That is the first task of the Bible. That is what Luke had in mind, when he was writing his gospel. He says: "It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, that thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed." (Lk 1,3-4). We can easily see that revelation cannot stop with historical fact. Just because the facts are historical, they must be communicated.

1.2.2. The scriptures *explain* what God has done

Historical events alone can be very dumb. For example, one could perhaps identify the occupation of the land of Canaan as a result of the average tensions between a number of tribes in the near east, or as a matter of a normal and simple war. One could identify the drought under Ahab as a normal climatic phenomenon. One could consider the death of Christ on the cross to be an average execution.

We see the necessity of an interpretation. And just that is what God has provided by the scriptures. Through his prophets and apostles, he gives us not only an account of what he has done, but also reveals the *sense, the meaning* of what was going on. The disciples of Christ, who went to Emmaus, show that. They could not understand why Christ had to die. It all seemed to them a great loss. And they were still more confused, when they heard that he had risen from the dead. On their way, Christ explained to them by the scriptures that he had to die and to rise again. He applied scripture to the facts. And the disciples began to understand the events. It was of course necessary that the New Testament was written. It has to explain the fulfilment of the OT promises concerning Christ. It has to show, that he really is the prophet Moses has spoken about, the redeemer who has come to Jerusalem, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

So we are told by the author of the book of Kings that the drought in Ahab's time was a judgement on Ahab and his government, that Elijah had ordained it and that finally through Elijah's prayer God made it rain again - after he had shown on Mt. Carmel that he is Jahwe, God alone. Paul explains in Romans 3:25-26 that the death of Christ is the propitiation for our sins, and that the righteousness is by faith in Christ. The author of Hebrews shows that Christ is the better offer, that in him, the better covenant has been made. Of course, the New Testament has to reveal the consequences of Christ's work: for example, that the people of God is no longer limited to the Jews, but extended to the Gentiles. It has to show how the world-wide church has to live.

1.2.3. The Scriptures are God's own word

In order to secure that the communication and the explanation of what God had done was not blurred by human sin, God gave his Spirit to lead the witnesses in their work. I am speaking of inspiration, or, more adequately, *theopneustia*. God tells us in 2Peter 1:21 that he has governed the apostles and prophets so that they could really speak God's word, that their human words at the same time were and still are God's own word. Here precisely, we find the other leg of revelation. It was by inspiration, *theopneustia*, that God gave his word. Here is the special point of God's revelatory work giving the scriptures.

The scriptures make this claim. Is it a reason to believe in them? Taken as an isolated phenomenon or as an isolated religious book, we would have many doubts, whether our faith in the Bible can be justified. But scripture is tied to history and history – redemptive history – to scripture. This couple makes sense. That is why inspiration cannot take place everywhere and at any time. Inspiration took place, when God's revealing deeds had to be communicated and explained. And in Christ, everything has been said. The culmination point of revelation has been reached. So, revelation has stopped.

1.3. God in history

1.3.1. What the Bible shows

Within that history, we can find a significant continuity. It is the continuity of promise and fulfilment. I would like to give an example. God has promised to Abraham in Gen 17:8: "And I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God." I suppose that Abraham came to Canaan at about 2090 b.C. and that God from that time on reiterated his promise at particular incidents. But, as you know, the descendants of Abraham went to Egypt and became slaves at a later time. The fulfilment of God's promise seemed to be impossible. But just in that situation God took up again his plan. We read in Exodus 6:2-8: "And God said to Moses, "I am The Lord. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty. ... I also established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they dwelt as sojourners. ... I will take you for my people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession. I am the Lord." Moses told that to his people, but they did not believe him, because of their broken spirit and their cruel bondage. But God does not depend upon man. He did what he had promised. So, we read in Joshua 21:43.45: "Thus the Lord gave to Israel all the land which he swore to give to their fathers; and having taken pos-

session of it, they settled there. ... Not one of all the good promises which the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass."

The Bible claims to be the word of God. The Koran, too, claims to be the word of Allah, the Almighty. So it is a crucial question, whether this claim is justified. We can see, how God over more than 600 years has kept his word and fulfilled it. We can see the same in the history of Old Testament Israel. I remind you of the promises of blessing and curse given in Deuteronomy 28. History has proved how God has fulfilled his word. His judgements on Israel through the Assyrian and Babylonian occupation as well as through the Romans in 70 A.D. and 135 A.D. are a most formidable proof, that God has put in practice in space and time, what he had promised. But also the overwhelming messianic prophecy made in the OT has been fulfilled. The saviour has come from Bethlehem, he was the suffering servant of the Lord, the lamb of God, who took upon him our sins. He did not remain in the grave, as David promised in Ps 16. Much more, he was exalted to become the king of the world, as Ps 2 had shown before. I conclude: Promise and fulfilment belong to the historical dimension. They presuppose that the promise is given earlier, and the fulfilment later. And they show that the same God is at work in that particular sphere of history.

Furthermore, God has worked signs and wonders in the context of his revelation. They, too, are credentials which call our attention to what is said or what is revealed at the particular incident. Signs and wonders are favouring the authority of scripture, because they indicate that God really was at work, for example during Christ's ministry on earth. Although many modern people would reject the scriptures because of the supernatural element, we should recognize the positive, god-revealing character of these signs.

God shows by all this that he is the true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Christ and the Apostles. He shows, that he really is there, and that he is veracious in what he says and does. Herein, christian faith differs from all other religions. Its claim that there has been revelation is not without reason.

1.3.2. What philosophy says

God in history - that is problematic for man. Already in ancient greek thought, but particularly since the enlightenment, history has been devaluated. The german philosopher G.E. Lessing in his treatise on *The proof of Spirit and Power* rejected historical truth because he perceived it to be incidental and relative. Nothing could be proved by historical truth, he maintains. On the other hand, he preferred eternal rational truth. This had a tremendous impact upon how the scriptures were read.

In the nineteenth century, scriptures were read less as a report of God's historical deeds. Including pietism read the scriptures as if it described human experience. And up to the present, modern theology has not ceased to do the same: scripture is only a mirror of christian experience, of christian self-consciousness. And it is no longer the personal God, who has spoken out the holy writ. Thus, modern philosophy attacks the heart of christian faith: revelation in space and time.

I would argue against that, that history is much less incidental and relative. History belongs to God's creation. The world is his creation, and man has been created in his image. Thus, the world and its history are not a sphere alien to God. God does not change himself, when he enters our world. He can remain God, although he does not appear in glory, but in humility. He does not change his veracity when he is speaking in a human

way and in human language. So, we can understand that God chooses this dimension to make himself known. That's why incarnation is not absurd either. Also, in the incarnation of his Son, he entirely preserves his deity. So, if God esteems history worthy to be the sphere where he reveals himself, then we are not allowed to devalue it simply because it appears to us to be immanent, relative and incidental. History is, on the contrary, the brightly illuminated stage, upon which God has shown himself. And history is ours. So let us again appreciate God's revelation by history and the scriptures.

This is the revelation-theological reason.

2. The Scriptures are the Means of Salvation

The second reason is a soteriological reason. In the above paragraph, I told you that by the scriptures, God communicates, what he has done. Here, I would like to call your attention to the fact, that God saves us in that way. Paul says: God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and *hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation* (2Cor 5:19) and: "For I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believeth" (Rom 1:16).

That is to say: Christ has saved us. But how do we get in contact with Christ? We tell our hearers, "Look at the cross", or "come to Christ". But we cannot expect them to travel to Jerusalem and look at the cross. It is no longer there. We, as evangelicals, are tempted to make coming to Christ an act of Christian experience. We think, well, when I pray to Christ, I am coming to him. That is correct, but only in a certain sense. We must come to the Christ of the scriptures. And the Christ of the scriptures is an historical one: the Christ who has been born by the virgin Mary, who has died for our sins, who was buried and who rose again. We must come to the Christ, who was here on earth. We do not have any other Christ. So we need a representative of the historical Christ. God has met this need and has ordained the word to make us partakers of his salvation. Let me repeat what Paul says: "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself etc., and *hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.*"

So, the word is the means by which God conveys to us the salvation in Christ. Since early Christian times, this has been disputed. Some theologians expected the ritually operated sacraments to be the way, by which we are saved. Catholicism, for instance, teaches that by baptism, God creates an undestroyable character, a *character indelebilis* within us. In fact, the sacraments are not empty, but they are not filled by a hidden operation of the Spirit creating a new being within us. According to the scriptures, the sacraments are filled by the word, the promise, that Christ has died for us and we with him, that he has given his body and his blood to redeem us. God wants us to *believe* what the sacraments say.

Others separate the Spirit from the word and are telling us that the word is of no use. The word is, they say, without power, it is weak, it is "the letter which kills" and refer to 2Cor 3:6. Only the inward operation of the Holy Spirit is supposed to give new life. So they neglect the word and look out for religious experiences.

In fact, hearing the word outwardly does not save. God wants us to understand and to believe, what he has said. But then we must hear, what he has said. Luther emphasized against the enthusiasts, that God does not give his Holy Spirit except by the outward word - the word of the scriptures, more precisely: the word of the Gospel. The word is

fully suited to do that, because it has been spoken by the Holy Spirit. It is spiritual, although human beings have written it.

By the Word, God creates the saving knowledge of Christ. This is a characteristic feature of the work of the Holy Spirit: to make Christ known. As the Bible is speaking of Christ, we are to meet him there. Through the Bible and nowhere else can we recognize him.

There is still more to say. Paul explains in Rom 10:17: So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. By the word, God creates faith. The word is the living seed, by which we are born again. We should be aware of this. We often want to do something, e.g. we want to merit salvation. We are very inventive to contribute something to our salvation. And we read the Bible as if it were a handbook for Christian living or a guide for Christian experience. We like to put in practice what it says. And we conclude that, if we do, what it says, we are good Christians. Nevertheless, that is false. The end of the word is faith. God wants us to believe in what he has promised. And he has promised that he has saved us in Christ. We are saved by faith - by faith alone. And as Christians, we are living by faith and doing works of faith. We are not called to do works and have experiences which are not by faith.

Finally let me say that scriptures are sufficient for the whole of Christian life: Pauls says in 2Tim 3:16: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of god may be perfect, and thoroughly furnished unto all good works." This is the soteriological reason. But there is still a third reason.

3. God has given it to us to believe in Him.

In a certain way, I am now turning your eyes to yourself – but only in a certain way. Whenever you can see that you are trusting in God's word, please keep in mind, that your faith is from God. God has, as Rom 8:30 shows, foreordained us to be his children. And he has put in practice what he had decided to do. Paul says: "... whom He predestined, these He also called". By his call through the word preached, he gave it to us to believe in him. He has created our faith in Christ. And because faith in Christ is the same as being faithful to the Bible, our relation to the Bible has its origin in God himself. It is a matter of God's eternal decree, of his unwavering will, that he has given it to us to understand and believe his word.

On the other hand, being true to the Bible is a personal attitude. That sounds somewhat Schleiermacherian: Being true to Bible would then be a matter of human facilities, of a human potential. This would mean that a spiritual thing had an anthropological source. But that is impossible. Although it is a personal attitude and although we are conscious of it, it is from God.

Being faithful to the Bible is neither a habit in the catholic sense of the word, an inner disposition or even a substantial reality, which God has created in us. We cannot say that because we are believing God's word today, we will do so tomorrow, too. In fact, our flesh is inclined to be unfaithful and to disbelieve. So, if we find ourselves as believers tomorrow, it is by the grace of God. God has promised to keep us. He will make us persevere in faith. By this gift, he does not make us look at our own, he has made us looking to him, to Jesus Christ, he has made us to believe the Gospel, his great promises

concerning his guidance here on earth and, much more, salvation and eternal life and everlasting glory in the world to come. God has given it to us. It is an act of his grace.

Should we ignore that privilege? Should we act against all evidence, by which God through the Holy Spirit has enlightened our hearts? Just *that* would be the sin against the Holy Spirit. Let us much more freely confess to God and to his people, that He in His kindness has saved us by leading us to understand the scriptures as the saving truth.

Although I turned your eyes to yourself at the beginning of this passage, the outcome is quite different. It leads us to the praise of God and his grace. So, this is the final, the properly theological reason, why we should be true to the Bible.