

1.

The Biblical Commission and Its Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels

The Biblical Commission

In 1902, by his Apostolic Letter *Vigilantiae*¹ Pope Leo XIII established the Pontifical Biblical Commission.

At that time Leo XIII gave the Commission the twofold task of *promoting* biblical interpretation in agreement with his encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*² and of *guarding* the Bible against false interpretations. His apostolic letter began with the word “*Vigilantiae*” (watchfulness, vigilance), and the watchdog aspect of the Commission prevailed, reflecting the troubled period in which it was set up. Though the Biblical Commission was not a Roman congregation in the strict sense, it was organized like one of the curial congregations (with cardinal members and expert biblical consultors).

Under Pope Pius X its task was determined anew. The Commission was to exercise its watchfulness by answering questions from Catholics about biblical problems. This it did above all by *responsa*, the technical term for its more-popularly-called decrees. These responses were usually stylized in the form of questions, often loaded, to which a brief answer was given, either *negative* or *affirmative*. The series of fourteen *responsa* issued between 1905 and 1915 became the hallmark of the Commission. They treated such matters as the following: the theory of implicit quotations; the theory of apparently historical narratives; the Mosaic authorship of the Penta-

1. ASS 35 (1902–3) 234–38; *EnchBib* §137–38; cf. A. Kleinhans, *LTK* 2. 359–60.

2. ASS 26 (1893–94) 269–92; *EnchBib* §81–134; DS §3280–94.

teach; the author and historical reliability of the fourth gospel; the character of the book of Isaiah; the historicity of Genesis 1–3; the author and date of the Psalms; the authorship, date, and historicity of the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke; the synoptic problem; the authorship, date, and historicity of Acts; the authorship and integrity of the pastoral letters; the authorship and composition of the epistle to the Hebrews; the parousia in Pauline writings.³ As a result of these *responsa* a dark cloud of fear and reactionary conservatism settled over Roman Catholic biblical scholarship during the first half of the twentieth century.

The decrees of the Biblical Commission were not infallibly issued. Pius X explained that they were “useful for the proper progress and the guidance of biblical scholarship along safe paths,” but he did require of Catholics the same submission as similar papally approved decrees of other Roman congregations.⁴ Thus was formulated their utilitarian and practical aim.

In the midst of World War II Pope Pius XII issued an encyclical

3. These and other early utterances can be found in *EnchBib* §160–61, 181–84, 187–89, 276–80, 324–31, 332–39, 383–89, 390–400, 401–6, 407–10, 411–13, 414–16; *RSS*, 117–38. For a modern commentary on these *responsa*, see T.A. Collins and R.E. Brown, “Church Pronouncements,” *NJBC*, art. 72, §25–28. For a few later utterances of the Commission, less pertinent to the topic under discussion here, see *EnchBib* §522–33, 535–37, 582–610, 622–33; *RSS*, 138–49, 154–72; cf. *NJBC*, art. 72, 29–33.

4. *Motu proprio Praeestantia sacrae Scripturae* (ASS 40 [1907] 723–26; *EnchBib* §268–73; DS §3503; *RSS*, 40–42): “. . . all are obliged in conscience to submit to past and future decisions of the Biblical Commission in the same way as to the decrees which pertain to doctrine issued by [other] sacred congregations and approved by the pope” (§271). This clarification was repeated in a *responsum* of the Commission itself issued on 27 February 1934 (*AAS* 26 [1934] 130–31; *EnchBib* §519; cf. B.N. Wambacq, “Pontifical Biblical Commission,” *NCE*, 11. 551–54). There ensued a discussion among theologians of the time about the character of the responses of the Commission, whether they were disciplinary or doctrinal. The majority seemed to think that they were not merely disciplinary, but “indirectly doctrinal.” There was also a discussion whether they were concerned with *veritas*, “truth,” or *securitas*, “security.” See L. Pirot, “Commission biblique,” *DBSup*, 2. 111–13.

on the promotion of biblical studies, *Divino afflante Spiritu* (1943).⁵ Since that time the Biblical Commission began to play a more open-minded role in promoting Catholic biblical scholarship. Its *responsa* gradually gave way to “letters” and “instructions,” which, though they sometimes expressed cautions about popular errors or excessive tendencies, gradually assumed a more positive character. The changed image became apparent in January 1948, when the Commission issued a nuanced answer to a (real) question addressed to it by Cardinal Suhard of Paris about the character of the first eleven chapters of Genesis.⁶ In 1951, when the Commission revised the list of topics for examinations to be taken to obtain ecclesiastical biblical degrees, it significantly dropped its own (formerly required) decrees.⁷

To many, both inside and outside the Catholic Church, however, the decrees seemed to be still in effect and the Commission seemed to be still the vigilance committee of old. In 1955 a semi-official explanation of the character of the decrees was issued. The secretary of the Commission, A. Miller, O.S.B., reviewed in *Benediktinische Monatsschrift* a newly revised edition of *Enchiridion biblicum*, a collection of church documents concerning biblical interpretation that had been published across the centuries.⁸ At the same time, the subsecretary of the Commission, A. Kleinhaus, O.F.M., did the same in the Roman periodical *Antonianum*.⁹ Both reviewers, though they wrote in different languages (the former in German, the latter in Latin), significantly used in paragraphs of identical wording an important distinction about the *responsa*.

5. *AAS* 35 (1943) 297–326; *EnchBib* §538–69; DS §3825–31; cf. *NJBC*, art. 72, §20–23.

6. *AAS* 40 (1948) 45–48; *EnchBib* §577–81; *RSS*, 150–53; cf. *NJBC*, art. 72, §31.

7. *AAS* 43 (1951) 748; *EnchBib* §638. Compare *AAS* 3 (1911) 48.

8. “Das neue biblische Handbuch,” *BenMon* 31 (1955) 49–50.

9. “De nova Enchiridii biblici editione,” *Anton* 30 (1955) 53–65.

They distinguished those that touched on faith and morals from those that dealt with literary criticism, authorship, integrity, date of composition, historicity, and similar questions. The former were said to be still valid; the latter were to be regarded as time-conditioned and corresponding to an historical context no longer existent. The two secretaries of the Commission frankly stated that Catholic scholars could in matters related to the latter group of decrees pursue their investigations, research, and interpretation “with full freedom” (*in aller Freiheit, plena libertate*). The significance of this distinction was not lost on Roman Catholic interpreters and was even brought to the attention of Protestant scholars.¹⁰

10. See E.F. Siegman, “The Decrees of the Pontifical Biblical Commission: A Recent Clarification,” *CBQ* 18 (1956) 23–29. For a different view of the distinction made by the secretaries of the Commission, see J.E. Steinmueller, *A Companion to Scripture Studies* (3 vols.; rev. ed.; New York: Wagner, 1969) 1. 301; he accuses Siegman of having “falsely concluded that the decrees have been tacitly revoked and are now only of historical interest.” He goes even further in a more recent publication (*The Sword of the Spirit* [Waco, TX: Stella Maris Books, 1977] 7 n. 1) in maintaining that the articles of Miller and Kleinhans were unauthorized and the two secretaries were to be brought before the Holy Office because of these articles but were saved from this ordeal through the personal intervention of Cardinal Tisserant before the Holy Father. This is the recollection of an old conservative, first published twenty-two years after the fact. Why did this allegation not emerge sooner? The point is that, as Steinmueller reveals, the secretaries were not brought before the Holy Office; such a political move was thwarted. Steinmueller’s can scarcely be regarded as “the real explanation,” *pace* J.P. O’Reilly (*The Priest* 36 [1980] 6). Here the principle *tacere est consentire* is valid; failure to speak against the secretaries equals consent to their affirmations.

That Siegman’s interpretation of the clarification is correct may be shown in various ways. A very similar interpretation was given in Europe by J. Dupont, O.S.B., “A propos du nouvel Enchiridion biblicum,” *RB* 62 (1955) 414–19. Moreover, many Roman Catholic interpreters of no little stature have been acting in their study and research on such an interpretation, and not a few of them have subsequently been named either consultants or members of the Biblical Commission itself. Such a respected French Dominican Old Testament scholar as A.M. Dubarle had even managed to publish a letter about the matter, prior to this semi-official clarification, in the leading German Protestant biblical periodical in order to offset the views of outsiders about the freedom of Catholic exegetes; see “Lettre à la rédaction,” *ZAW* 66 (1954) 149–51.

As a matter of fact, almost all the decrees of the Biblical Commission issued between 1905 and 1915, at the height of the reaction to modernism, belong to the second category. Say what one will about the character of the distinction made by the two secretaries of the Commission, the advances made by Catholic biblical scholars in the last thirty-five years and the acceptance of their work in non-Roman Catholic circles reveal the validity and significance of that distinction.

Since the encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu* and the letter sent to Cardinal Suhard, the Biblical Commission has issued an instruction about the treatment of biblical subjects in seminaries and houses of theological study of religious orders and congregations (1950)¹¹ and a Declaration (1953) about a book on the Psalms.¹²

In June 1961 a Roman *monitum* was issued concerning the historicity of the Bible.¹³ Significantly enough, it came not from the

The reader should beware of the summary of the clarification given in *RSS*, 175–76, which omits all reference to the crucial phrases, *in aller Freiheit, plena libertate*, “with all freedom.”

11. *AAS* 42 (1950) 495–505; *EnchBib* §582–610; *RSS*, 157.

12. *AAS* 45 (1953) 432; *EnchBib* §621.

13. *AAS* 53 (1961) 507; *RSS*, 174 (the reader should again beware of the tendentious title put on the translation here; the *monitum* was not addressed solely to “biblical scholars”).

The text of the *monitum* reads:

“Though biblical studies are progressing in a praiseworthy manner, assertions and opinions are circulating here and there that call in question the proper historical and objective truth [*germanam veritatem historicam et obiectivam*] of sacred scripture, not only of the Old Testament (as Pope Pius XII had already sadly noted in his encyclical ‘*Humani Generis*’ [cf. *AAS* 42 (1950) 576]), but also of the New, even with regard to the words and deeds of Christ Jesus.

“Since such assertions and opinions create anxieties for both pastors and the faithful, the cardinals who are charged with the protection of doctrine on faith and morals have considered it necessary to warn all those who deal with the sacred writings either orally or in writing to treat so great a subject with prudence and reverence. Let them always pay attention to the teaching of the fathers, the mind of the church, and the magisterium, lest consciences be disturbed or truths of the faith be harmed.

Biblical Commission, but from the Holy Office (as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was then called). An appended brief note recorded that the agreement of the cardinals of the Biblical Commission had been obtained for the *monitum*. Nevertheless, it was clear that the watchdog role was now being played by a different Roman congregation.

By this time the Biblical Commission itself had gone through a process of opening up, leading to the positive promotion of biblical studies. In 1963 five distinguished European biblical scholars, noted for their openness to modern interpretation of the Bible, were associated with the Commission as consultants: R. Schnackenburg (Germany), C. Spicq, O.P. (Switzerland), X. Léon-Dufour, S.J. (France), B. Rigaux, O.F.M. (Belgium), and G. Castellino, S.D.B. (Italy). This list of consultants was further expanded in 1965 by other well-known and respected names of contemporary scholarship: B.M. Ahern, C.P. (United States), R.A.F. MacKenzie, S.J. (Canada), P.W. Skehan (United States), H. Schürmann (East Germany), R. Lach (France), and G. Rinaldi (Italy). In 1964 three new cardinals were added to the Commission, two of whom were biblical specialists: B. Alfrink (Holland), F. König (Austria), and I. Antoniutti (Italy). True, the conservative cardinals A. Ottaviani, E. Ruffini, and M. Browne, O.P. were still retained as members of the Commission, but their influence was now counter-balanced. The image of the Commission itself was gradually changing.

A further step in the change of the image of the Commission was taken in its Instruction of 1964 on the historical truth of the gospels. This Instruction showed that the Commission could concretely handle in a positive way a problem that vexed many modern

"This warning is issued with the agreement of the cardinals of the Pontifical Biblical Commission."

Cf. *TS* 22 (1961) 442 for an explanation of *germanam veritatem historicam et obiectivam*.

Christian students of the Bible both in and outside of the Roman communion. In that Instruction a distinction was proposed that is fundamental for the proper interpretation of the canonical gospels by anyone who would try to understand what they are all about.

Before turning to that Instruction, however, we should add two further developments of later date to complete this brief sketch of the role of the Biblical Commission in the modern Roman Catholic Church and of the transformed image projected by it in the last decade and a half. *First*, the fundamental distinction proposed by the Commission in its Instruction of 1964 was adopted by the fathers of Vatican Council II in chapter 5 of the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, which treated of the New Testament and its relation to revelation.¹⁴ Thus the authority of an ecumenical council was added to the proposal made in the 1964 Instruction of the Biblical Commission. *Second*, in 1971 Pope Paul VI completely revamped the Biblical Commission, making it a counterpart of the Theological Commission, associating both of them more closely to the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, and staffing it no longer with cardinals but with twenty members of international background, many of them biblical scholars of recognized competence.¹⁵

14. *Dei verbum* §19; *AAS* 58 (1966) 817–36, esp. pp. 826–27. See pp. 163–64 below.

15. *Motu proprio Sedula cura* (*AAS* 63 [1971] 665–69).—In its newly-constituted form the Biblical Commission has issued no decree or instruction so far, but only a collection of essays and statements on christology and the church (see p. 166). One report prepared by it on New Testament data about the possible ordination of women was leaked to the press; see "Can Women Be Priests?" *Origins* 6 (1976–77) 92–96. Cf. the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood," *ibid.* 517–24.

The names of the members of the Commission can be found in *Annuario pontificio* each year.

The Instruction of 1964

The Instruction *Sancta Mater Ecclesia* dealt with “the historical truth of the gospels.”¹⁶ It treated a problem that had been the concern of many Catholics in the immediately preceding decades, that surfaced in the discussions of the bishops at the beginning of Vatican Council II, and that continues to be of concern to many theologians and lay people. Unfortunately the sage advice that was incorporated in the Instruction has frequently been ignored in the circles where it is needed most.

That an age-old problem had been posed in a new way was evident from the *monitum* of 1961, published by the Holy Office on the same subject.¹⁷ That document, however, was wholly negative in character and shed no light on the problem itself. The Instruction of the Biblical Commission, coming at a time when it did, during the course of Vatican Council II, proved to be, by contrast, a positive document of no little importance. Given the trend of modern Catholic gospel studies in the immediately preceding decade and the diverse reaction to them in the church at large, there is reason to study the Instruction in some detail to appreciate its importance.

16. The first publication of “*Instructio de historica evangeliorum veritate*” appeared in *OssRom* 14 May 1964, p. 3 (with an accompanying Italian translation); the definitive publication is found in *AAS* 56 (1964) 712–18. Cf. DS §3999–99e.

An English translation of the Instruction appeared in Catholic newspapers in the United States; because it was faulty in places and unreliable in crucial paragraphs, I appended to the original form of this discussion an improved translation prepared from the Latin text in *OssRom*. This translation, now slightly revised, follows the present commentary. My translation preserves the paragraphing of the original. Only certain paragraphs in the Latin text are numbered with arabic numerals; they have been retained. To facilitate reference to the text of the Instruction, however, I have added roman numerals to all of its paragraphs in my translation.

After this translation and commentary were prepared, the secretary of the Biblical Commission sent out an English version of the Instruction. It can be found in *CBQ* 26 (1964) 305–12; *Tablet* (London) 218 (30 May 1964) 617–19; *TBT* 13 (1964) 821–28; *AER* 151 (1964) 5–11.

17. See n. 13 above.

That the Instruction was a well-nuanced document became evident from newspaper reports announcing its publication; some of the best of them interpreted it in almost diametrically opposed senses. The *New York Times* ran a headline: “Vatican Cautions Students of the Bible; Rejects as Dangerous and Invalid Any Conclusions Not Arising from Faith; Inquiry Limits Defined; Modern Historical Methods Accepted If Scholars Are Wary of ‘Prejudices.’”¹⁸ On the contrary, the *New York Herald Tribune* summed up its report under the headline: “Vatican Gives Green Light to Biblical Scholars.”¹⁹

When studied closely, however, the Instruction was seen to be a document that does not commit Catholic students of the gospels to a fundamentalistic literalness in the matter of their historicity. It contains no condemnation of any specific modern opinion about the historical value of the gospels. Though it catalogues in some detail questionable presuppositions of many form critics, this is done to clear the way to a recognition of the permanent value of the form-critical method itself. Consequently, the Instruction is an historic “first,” the first official ecclesiastical statement openly countenancing biblical criticism and frankly admitting the distinction of three stages of the gospel tradition, which has emerged from the form-critical study of the gospels.

The Title of the Instruction

The 1964 document is entitled *Instructio de historica evangeliorum veritate*, “An Instruction about the Historical Truth of the Gospels.” A close analysis of its text reveals that the most important

18. *New York Times*, 14 May 1964, 37 (article written by R.C. Doty). His inaccurate summary of the Instruction was irresponsibly reproduced in great part in *HPR* 64 (1963–64) 773 (“Attention Biblical Scholars”).

19. *New York Herald Tribune*, 14 May 1964, 7 (article written by S. de Gramont).

word in the title is not the adjective *historica*, which might have been one's initial expectation, but the preposition *de*, "about." Significantly, par. III,²⁰ which states the problem, omits the word "historical": "because many writings are being spread abroad in which the truth of the deeds and words which are contained in the gospels is questioned."²¹ In the light of the rest of the Instruction the omission of the adjective seems intentional. In fact, though *historica veritas* appears in the title of the document, it is used only once in its text, and then in a sentence in which is decried a certain philosophical or theological presupposition of the form-critical method, to which no Catholic exegete would subscribe anyway.²² In none of the positive directives of the Instruction does the phrase "historical truth" reappear. The Biblical Commission was evidently far more interested in sketching in broad lines the character of the truth of the gospels than in just reasserting that the gospels are "historical."

The Structure of the Instruction

After three introductory paragraphs the Commission addresses directives to (a) exegetes, (b) professors of scripture in seminaries and similar institutions, (c) preachers, (d) those who publish for the faithful, and (e) directors of biblical associations. Under (d) ordinar-

20. On the numbering of the paragraphs, see n. 16 above.

21. The Latin text runs: "... quod multa scripta vulgantur, quibus veritas factorum et dictorum quae in evangeliiis continentur, in discrimen vocatur." This sentence echoes the wording of the *monitum* of the holy office. But it is noteworthy that a simpler phraseology has now been used. The *monitum* had complained of assertions and opinions that were circulating "that call in question the proper historical and objective truth of sacred scripture, not only of the Old Testament . . . but also of the New, even with regard to the words and deeds of Christ Jesus" (see the full text in n. 13 above).

22. Par. V (middle). The Latin text reads, "Alii e falsa notione fidei procedunt ac si ipsa veritatem historicam non curet, immo cum eadem componi non possit." The immediately following sentence uses the phrase "historicam vim et indolem documentorum revelationis," an expression which has a wider connotation.

ies (i.e. above all, diocesan bishops) are reminded to be vigilant of publications on scripture. Except for the first group (a), and the omission may be a mere typographical error, the groups addressed are clearly mentioned in italics. In the directives addressed to the exegetes, italics are again used to indicate the three stages of the gospel tradition discussed there. In this way the structure of the document is evident.²³ The conclusion consists of two paragraphs, in the last of which appears the approval of Pope Paul VI, dated 21 April 1964.

The Introduction (Paragraphs I–III)

The church's concern for the scriptures is recalled as the basis and background for all the work of exegetes. They are urged to rely not only on their resources, but also on God's help and the light of the church.

In par. II joy is expressed at the growing number of competent interpreters of the Bible in the church of today. Explicit recognition is made of the fact that they have been following papal encouragements. This clause was obviously incorporated into the Instruction in order to offset the criticism heard at times in Catholic circles that "exegetes" have been undermining the faith with their new interpretations. There follows a counsel to charity needed in this area so peculiarly prone to emotional discussion. It repeats the counsels found in *Divino afflante Spiritu* and *Vigilantiae*. Tucked away between the quotations is the remark that not even St. Jerome was always successful in handling the scriptural difficulties of his time.²⁴

23. The italics of the original are preserved in my translation of the Instruction so that the structure of the document should be evident. The principle underlying the use of arabic numbers for certain paragraphs, however, changes after a while; though they too have been preserved, they are not a real guide to the structure. My references will always make use of the added roman numerals. On the opening sentence of the Instruction, see G.F. Woods, *TS* 27 (1966) 725.

24. For an example of the troubles which Jerome had, see my resume of an episode in his life concerning the translation of Hebrew *qiqayôn* of Jonah 4:6, in *TS*

Paragraph III is like a topic sentence. It sets forth the problem to be discussed and states the Commission's purpose in issuing the Instruction.

Directives for Exegetes (Paragraphs IV–XI)

Eight of the following fifteen paragraphs of the Instruction are addressed to exegetes (pars. IV–XI). When these paragraphs are compared with the rest of the document, it is evident that its essential directives are found in this part. The directives for seminary professors, preachers, popular writers, and directors of biblical associations are hortatory and prudential. Exhortations and cautions are, of course, included in the directives to the exegetes, but it is only in this part of the Instruction that one finds directives of a positive, didactic nature.

Paragraph IV begins with an exhortation addressed to “Catholic exegetes” (*exegeta catholicus*). They are counseled to derive profit from *all* the contributions of former interpreters, especially from those of the fathers and doctors of the church. In this they are to follow the example of the church itself. Moreover, they are also urged to utilize the norms of “rational” and “Catholic hermeneutics.” What is meant here by “rational” hermeneutics is the universally admitted principles of criticism that prevail in the study of all forms of literature (in contrast to certain “fads” that emerge from time to time). Such principles include the norms of literary and historical criticism that guide any philologist or interpreter of ancient or modern literature or documents. The addition of “Catholic” defines further norms that must guide the Catholic interpreter (e.g. that the Bible is a collection of inspired writings, that genuine revelation is contained in it, that its fundamental purpose is the upbuilding of the people of God, etc.). What is especially meant by

22 (1961) 426–27. He used *hedera*, “ivy,” whereas older Latin versions had *cucurbita*, “gourd,” and Augustine took him to task for it.

the norms of rational and Catholic hermeneutics is further explained by the recommendation of the aids offered by historical method. In particular, one is singled out from among them. The Commission urges the exegete once again to study the literary form used by the sacred writer. The Instruction recalls the words of Pius XII and stresses that the use of this mode of interpretation is the exegete's *duty* and that it may not be neglected.²⁵ Alas, this directive of the Instruction has not always been heeded in the time since its publication.

Particularly important is the following sentence of par. IV stating that a general rule of hermeneutics is applicable to both the Old and New Testaments: the composition of their books has been guided by modes of thinking and writing contemporary with their authors (and not necessarily with those of modern readers). This indirect reference to the nature of the gospel testimony briefly outlines the bulk of the following directives in pars. VII–X. For the investigation of the modes of speech and of literary forms—in effect, what is usually referred to as form criticism—cannot be dispensed with in the interpretation of any biblical books, not even of the

25. An outspoken opponent of the study of the literary forms of the Bible was E. Cardinal Ruffini. He was a member of the Biblical Commission, at the time when this Instruction was issued, which publicly reiterated the injunction of Pius XII to the exegetes of the church in *Divino afflante Spiritu* to pursue such study, especially with regard to the gospels. Cardinal Ruffini's rejection of this type of interpretation can be found in his article, “Generi letterari e ipotesi di lavoro nei recenti studi biblici,” *OssRom*, 24 August 1961, p. 1. Having appeared on the first page of such a prominent church-organ and having been sent by the Sacred Congregation of Studies and Universities to the rectors of all Italian seminaries, it was accorded no little respect. It appeared in an English version in many Catholic newspapers in the United States; cf. “Literary Genres and Working Hypotheses in Recent Biblical Studies,” *AER* 145 (1961) 362–65. In this article, published after the death of Pius XII, Ruffini went so far in his disagreement as to quote Pius XII indirectly and to use the word “absurdity” in connection with the study of such forms. The present Instruction was meant to put an end to the confusion that his article created. Cf. H. Fesquet, “Nouvelles querelles dans les milieux romains de la critique biblique,” *Le Monde*, 1 November 1961, p. 8.

canonical gospels. Thus, in the last sentences of par. IV are set forth the guiding principles of the whole Instruction.

First, the interpreter must use “all the means available” in the interpretation of the gospels; no method or means of interpretation may be excluded a priori, but all are to be used in an intelligent way to attain the goal intended. *Second*, it is not so much a question of ensuring at all costs the historical character of every gospel verse as it is of ascertaining the way in which truth has been there presented. One must be more concerned about a better understanding of the peculiar nature of the testimony borne to Jesus Christ in the gospels.

Paragraph IV has thus dealt with the principles, whereas par. V turns to the concrete use of the form-critical method in the study of the gospels. This method was developed by scholars at the beginning of this century in answer to certain definite problems. Today it is no longer a purely methodological theory, but has acquired adult stature. Its infant stages, however, developed only with the most meager involvement of Catholic interpreters; and today the latter bring certain distinctions into the discussion of it. For this reason par. V distinguishes clearly between the “reasonable elements” (*sana elementa*) in the method itself and the questionable “philosophical and theological principles.” Such presuppositions have often been closely linked with the method itself and tended to vitiate its conclusions, but they can be separated and have often been so separated in more recent decades. It is impossible to explain here in detail the method itself or the questionable presuppositions.²⁶ One should

26. For a brief description of the method and a discussion of the problems involved, see A. Wikenhauser, *New Testament Introduction* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1958) 253–77; and, better still, A. Wikenhauser and J. Schmid, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament* (6th ed.; Freiburg im B.: Herder, 1973) 290–96. Or J.L. Price, *Interpreting the New Testament* (2nd ed.; New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971) 160–82; A.H. McNeile, *An Introduction to the Study of the New Testament* (rev. ed. C.S.C. Williams; Oxford: Clarendon, 1953) 458; K. Koch, *The Growth of the Biblical Tradition: The Form-Critical Method* (New York: Scribner, 1969) [for application to Old Testament interpretation]; X. Léon-Dufour, “La lecture critique des

note the six specific presuppositions or “principles” listed in the Instruction; they would normally be rejected by Catholic interpreters in any case, since many of them are the heritage of rationalism: (1) the denial of a supernatural order; (2) the denial of God’s intervention in the world in strict revelation; (3) the denial of the possibility and existence of miracles; (4) the incompatibility of faith with historical truth; (5) an almost a priori denial of the historical value and nature of the documents of revelation; (6) a disdain for apostolic testimony and undue emphasis on the creative community in the early church.²⁷

Having made this distinction between the “reasonable elements” and the “philosophical and theological principles” of past form-critical study, the Biblical Commission goes on in par. VI to another, more important distinction, which is really the fruit of a

évangiles,” *Introduction à la Bible: Edition nouvelle* (ed. A. George and P. Grelot; Paris: Desclée) 3/2 (1976) 187–207; A. Robert and A. Feuillet, *Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Desclée, 1965) 287–310; Bp. J.-J. Weber, “‘Formgeschichte’: Wert und Grenzen dieser Methode für das Neue Testament,” *TheolGeg* 6 (1963) 63–72; reprinted, *Herderkorrespondenz* 17 (1962–63) 425–29.

27. The sixth item seems to be directed against the original German Protestant form critics, whose ideas of *Gemeindeftheologie*, “community theology,” are apparently being repudiated. See V.T. O’Keefe, “Towards Understanding the Gospels,” *CBQ* 21 (1959) 171–89.

There is, of course, a sense in which it is legitimate to say that the early Christian community “created” a story about Jesus. Take, for instance, the question of divorce. The *Sitz im Leben* in the early church(es) may well have been a debate or the solving of some specific case of conscience (“Do we Christians permit divorce or not?”). Words of Jesus on the subject were recalled, and the story (as in Mk 10:2–12 [minus the Marcan adaptation]) was “created” at that time. Such a story was likely to be repeated for a generation, with varying modifications, until it became a norm for deciding similar cases and was incorporated into the gospel tradition proper. For an attempt to sort out the phases of the tradition about this particular example, see my article, “The Matthean Divorce Texts and Some New Palestinian Evidence,” *TS* 37 (1976) 197–226; reprinted, *To Advance the Gospel: New Testament Studies* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 79–111.

A difficulty is sensed in that the expression “created” often connotes fabrication out of whole cloth. For this reason it is perhaps wiser to speak of the “formation” of the story in the early church rather than of its “creation.”

sane use of this method as applied to the gospels. This is the distinction for which this Instruction has rightly been praised.

It concerns the "three stages" of the gospel tradition: (I) the origin of the traditional material in the dealings of Jesus with his disciples during his ministry; (II) the passing on and the forming of the material in early apostolic preaching; (III) the shaping of it into written gospels by evangelists. This view of the gospel tradition is adopted by the Commission from previous use of it by Roman Catholic scholars.²⁸ It enables one to evaluate "the nature of gospel testimony, the religious life of the early churches, and the sense and value of apostolic tradition" (par. IV).

The Instruction speaks of "three stages of tradition" (*tria tempora traditionis*). What is meant has often been referred to by other terms, a difference which serves to bring out other aspects of the problem and its history. Some writers have spoken of three levels of comprehension according to which the gospel text is to be understood; others speak of the three contexts of the gospel material. In the latter case, the expression is a development of the original idea of the *Sitz im Leben* of the German form-critical pioneers. After the First World War they tried to assign to the various gospel stories and episodes a *Sitz im Leben*, a "vital context" in the early church that would have given rise to the story, unit, or episode. For these pioneers, *Sitz im Leben* meant *Sitz im Leben der Kirche*, the setting in the life of the early church. In time, as the debate developed, people

28. It would be impossible, and really idle, to try to cite all the Catholic exegetes who have used this distinction in modern times. As an example of some who antedated the Biblical Commission, see J. Dupont, *Les béatitudes* (2nd ed.; Bruges: Abbaye de Saint-André, 1958); B.M. Ahern, "The Gospels in the Light of Modern Research," *ChicStud* 1 (1962) 5-16; D.M. Stanley, "Balaam's Ass, or a Problem in New Testament Hermeneutics," *CBQ* 20 (1958) 556; J.A. Fitzmyer, "The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius and Recent Gospel Study," *Woodstock Letters* 91 (1962) 246-74; reprinted *Jesuit Spirit in a Time of Change* (ed. R.A. Schroth et al.; Westminster, MD: Newman, 1968) 153-81.

For a more recent use of the distinction, see R.E. Brown et al. (eds.), *Peter in the New Testament* (New York: Paulist; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1973) 10-11.

began to ask about the *Sitz im Leben Jesu*, the vital context in the ministry of Jesus itself, in which the saying or episode might have had its origin in some form or other. Obviously, to recapture this setting with any certainty is a very delicate and difficult undertaking. Finally, modeled on these two *Sitze im Leben* was a third, which is only analogous. Granted that questions about the vital context in the early church or in Jesus' ministry might be legitimate and instructive, nevertheless the important thing is the *Sitz im Evangelium*, the gospel context of the saying or event recorded: How did the evangelist make use of the traditional material that he had inherited or received? No matter what name one might prefer for the three stages or their respective nuances, the same issue is involved: In order to understand what the inspired, canonical gospels are telling us about the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, who has become for Christians Christ the Lord, one has to make this important threefold distinction. Paragraph VI states this expressly in a topic sentence.

Stage I—Jesus' Life and Teaching

Paragraph VII begins with the italicized words *Christus Dominus*, using titles which are more properly characteristic of the second stage. It would have been better to speak here of *Iesus Nazarenus*. In any case, this paragraph deals with the things that Jesus of Nazareth actually did and said, with the things that the chosen disciples saw and heard. Here two things are emphasized: (1) What the disciples saw and heard enabled them to give testimony about Jesus' life and teaching. (2) The technique which Jesus used in teaching was accommodation, intended to make his words understood and retainable. The first few statements in the paragraph are documented with references to the New Testament. The rest of it is a speculative reconstruction, slightly idyllic, but undoubtedly expressing what is essentially to be recalled about this first stage of the gospel tradition.

It is the stage of the *ipsissima verba Iesu*, "the very words of

Jesus.” For Christians it has always somehow seemed to be the stage of the greatest importance. What Jesus himself really said would seem to be more important than what the early church passed on as his teaching or what the evangelists report as his sayings.²⁹ And yet it is noteworthy that the Biblical Commission has not insisted in any way that what we have in the gospels is an exact record of this first stage of the tradition.³⁰

Stage II—The Apostles’ Preaching

The second stage of the tradition is treated in par. VIII. Once again the emphasis is put on the testimony of the apostles and the accommodations that they made in their message to the needs of those to whom they preached. Even when the Commission says that the apostles after the resurrection “faithfully explained his life and words,” it appeals significantly enough to none of the gospels as examples of this faithful explanation, but to a part of one of the speeches of Peter in Acts (10:36–41). Peter’s speech (before the conversion of Cornelius and his household) gives a summary of the ministry of Jesus. It has been regarded by C.H. Dodd³¹ and others as an example of the early church’s kerygmatic preaching. (Mark, the earliest of the canonical gospels, has even been thought to be an expansion of some such summary outline.) Strikingly enough, though no “words” of Jesus are quoted in this speech of Peter,³² it is

29. See further my article, “Belief in Jesus Today,” *Commonweal* 101 (1974) 137–42.

30. See pp. 27–28 above.

31. *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1936; reprinted New York: Harper, 1962). For another view of this matter, see U. Wilckens, *Die Missionsreden der Apostelgeschichte* (WMANT 5; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener-V., 1961) 63–70; but cf. J. Dupont, “Les discours missionnaires des Actes des Apôtres: D’après un ouvrage récent,” *RB* 69 (1962) 37–60, esp. pp. 39–50.

32. Note, by way of contrast, Acts 20:35, where a saying of Jesus is recorded which did not find its way into the canonical gospels.

still regarded by the Biblical Commission as a “faithful” explanation of Jesus’ “life and words.” This nuance is not to be overlooked.

In this section the Commission rightly counteracts the idea that the new faith of the apostles after the resurrection and the experience of Pentecost wiped out all authentic recollection of what Jesus did and said, or deformed their impression of him, or volatilized him into some kind of a “mythical” person. The Commission seeks to stress that the New Testament writings, for all their proclamation of Jesus as Lord, assert the *fundamental continuity* between Jesus of Nazareth and Jesus Christ as Lord. Jesus the preacher may well have become the preached one, but this has not developed merely by a Hellenistic process of mythical apotheosis.

Though this questionable conception of the risen Christ is rejected, the Commission insists that the apostles passed on what Jesus had actually said and done “with that fuller understanding which they enjoyed” as a result of the experience they went through at the first Easter and of the illumination of the Spirit of truth at Pentecost. Obvious examples of this *fuller understanding* are quoted from the Johannine gospel (2:22; 12:16 [“His disciples did not understand this at first; but when Jesus had been glorified, then they remembered that what had been written about him was what they had done to him”]; 11:51–52). While these instances are explicitly so identified in the Johannine text itself, the Commission does not imply that this fuller understanding is limited only to these three passages. Rather, it emphasizes that the apostles made accommodations to the needs of the audiences, which led them to rephrase Jesus’ sayings and recast their stories about him. Certainly, some differences in the synoptic tradition are owing to this sort of accommodation, which affected the oral tradition in the pre-literary stage, no matter how much leeway one may want to accord the evangelists themselves in the third stage.

Paragraph VIII ends with the mention of “various modes of speaking” that the apostles used in their ministry and preaching. Because they had to speak to “Greeks and barbarians, the wise and

the foolish," such contact influenced them and naturally caused further adaptations of the message that they were preaching. By insisting that the "literary forms" employed in such adaptation must be distinguished and properly assessed (*distinguendi et perpendendi sunt*), the Commission has clearly in mind the use of the form-critical method. The forms that are specifically mentioned in the Instruction ("catecheses, stories,³³ testimonia, hymns, doxologies, prayers") are indeed found in the New Testament, but they are not all used in the gospels, at least in any abundance. One thinks more readily of genealogies, parables, miracle-stories, wisdom sayings, appearance stories, infancy narratives, etc. However, the point is made that various literary forms did develop in this stage of the Christian tradition, and that the student of the gospels must learn to distinguish them and assess them. Still more important is the admission by the Commission that there are other forms not specifically mentioned (*aliaeque id genus formae litterariae*), such as were used by the people of that time.

Stage III—The Evangelists' Writing

The longest exposition in the Instruction is devoted to the third stage of the gospel tradition in par. IX. What strikes one here is the emphasis laid on the evangelists' "method suited to the peculiar purpose which each one set for himself." The Commission speaks explicitly of *auctores sacri*, "sacred writers," and leaves the question open whether any of the evangelists might themselves have been

33. The Latin word used in the Instruction is *narrationes*, which some may prefer to translate as "narratives." In par. IX it occurs in the singular in the sense of "account," because of its allusion to Luke 1:1. But neither "narrative" nor "account" sufficiently conveys the idea of a literary form, whereas "story" does. It may be objected that this word is "loaded," connoting "fable," "fairy tale," etc. True, it often has this connotation, but not always, nor even necessarily. In the long run, the word "story" does not necessarily connote fiction any more than "narrative" connotes what is factual. I am using "story" without implying any pejorative connotation or value judgment.

"apostles," those of whom it speaks in Stage II. (I speak of "evangelists" without prejudice to that distinction.) The Biblical Commission reckons with a process of selection, synthesis, and explication at this stage of the gospel tradition. From the stories and sayings, which circulated in stage II, the evangelists selected material to suit their purposes, synthesized it by topical arrangement, and explicated (*explanantes*) it to suit the needs of the Christian communities for which they compiled their gospels. Adaptation to the needs of the readers also influenced the process at this stage. Because the evangelists often transposed episodes to a new context, the interpreter must seek out the meaning intended by the evangelist in narrating a story or recounting a saying of Jesus in the chosen context. In saying this the Commission has implicitly reckoned again not only with form criticism, but also with redaction criticism, a phase of modern gospel study that has built upon and added to the earlier form-critical method. Whereas the latter was interested in the history of the literary form (i.e. what the form is and how its development can be discerned as it moves through the tradition), redaction criticism seeks to trace the redactional or editorial history of a saying or episode: How has a given evangelist editorially modified what he has inherited from the tradition before him, and to what purpose (literary, historical, or theological)? This kind of critical study often reveals much about the theological purpose of the evangelist and tells us about the kind of literary portrait of Jesus that he has been seeking to paint, as he utilized and modified inherited material.

After the exhortation to the exegete to ferret out *the evangelist's* meaning, the Commission makes a statement about the "truth" involved in such a process of redaction: "For the truth of the story [*or narrative, if one insists*] is not at all affected by the fact that the evangelists relate the words and deeds of Jesus in a different order and express his sayings not literally but differently, while preserving their sense." The Commission speaks here of "truth" only and does not specify it as "historical truth." One would have to ask what the adjective "historical" would mean in this context after the admis-

sion of the redactional modifications practiced by the evangelists. One could, of course, then ask, "Well, if it is not a question of historical truth, of what kind is it?" And the answer would have to be: "gospel truth."³⁴ (The discussion in par. X will bear this out.) Paragraph IX ends with a quotation from St. Augustine which, even though it comes from a writer who holds a less sophisticated view of the gospels than that being advocated in this Instruction, is nuanced enough to be pertinent to the question. Augustine clearly affirms no naive understanding of the "historical truth" of the gospels. His words as quoted could never support a simplistic equation of stage III of the gospel tradition with stage I thereof.

In par. X, which ends the discussion of the three distinct stages of the gospel tradition, the Commission insists that interpreters will not be fulfilling their task unless they pay careful attention to all the facets of that tradition. It clearly implies, moreover, that the distinction itself is the result of the "laudable achievements of recent re-

³⁴ This answer may, of course, sound facetious. It is not meant in the sense in which we commonly use the expression in English: "Now I'll tell you the gospel truth about that." (When this commentary of mine was translated into German as *Stuttgarter Bibelstudien* 1, I warned one of the editors of the series that this answer would be misunderstood in German, unless he sought some way of explaining it. That proved impossible. The booklet was eventually reviewed in *TRev* 63 [1967] 1-8 by an Old Testament professor; he perhaps should be pardoned for what he wrote, but his smugness in criticizing my comments revealed that he had completely missed the point.)

I intend the phrase the "gospel truth" to be taken in a serious way, which the very form of gospel demands. After all truth is analogous; or, as A. Cardinal Bea once put it, "Sua cuique generi literario est veritas" ("Each literary form has its own truth") (*De Scripturae sacrae inspiratione* [2nd ed.: Rome: Biblical Institute, 1935] 106 §90). Truth in a literary text is gauged by the form or genre employed; one has to distinguish historical truth from poetic truth, rhetorical truth from epistolary, hortatory truth from prayer truth (as in the psalter), and legal truth from mythical. In this sense it is legitimate to speak of "gospel truth," i.e. that religious and salutary truth expressed by the evangelist which may indeed make use of historical, or genealogical, or hortatory truth. Since it is difficult to define what a gospel is, it is equally difficult to specify properly in what the gospel truth may consist. In any case, it is not simply identical with "historical truth" in some fundamentalistic sense.

search." Then follows this significant statement: "From the results of the new investigations it is apparent that the doctrine and the life of Jesus were not simply reported for the sole purpose of being remembered, but were 'preached' so as to offer the church a basis of faith and of morals. . . ."³⁵ The Commission implies thereby that the "gospel truth" is not tied to any fundamentalistic literalness or superior quality of apostolic recollections or reminiscences.

The last paragraph addressed to the exegetes (XI) begins with an admission that there are still many serious problems on which the exegete "can and must freely (*libere*) exercise his skill and genius." The admission about the freedom of exegetical research is a repetition of the statement of Pius XII about the liberty of the Catholic exegete in *Divino afflante Spiritu*. The statement in the Instruction, however, is a paraphrase and contains a significant addition that spells out the relationship of the work of exegetes in the Catholic Church to the magisterium or teaching authority in the church. We juxtapose the two texts:

Divino afflante Spiritu

There remain therefore many things, and of the greatest importance, in the discussion and exposition of which the skill and genius of Catholic commentators may and ought to be freely exercised, so that each may contribute his part to the advantage of all, to the continued progress of sacred doctrine, and to

Instructio

There are still many things, and of the greatest importance, in the discussion and exposition of which the Catholic exegete can and must freely exercise his skill and genius, so that each may contribute to the advantage of all, to the continued progress of sacred doctrine, to the preparation and further support of

³⁵ The Latin text of this sentence reads: "Cum ex eis quae novae inquisitiones contulerunt appareat doctrinam et vitam Iesu non simpliciter relatas fuisse, eo solo fine ut memoria tenerentur, sed 'praedicatas' fuisse ita ut Ecclesiae fundamentum fidei et morum praebent, interpres testimonium Evangelistarum indefesse perscrutans, vim theologiam perennem Evangeliorum altius illustrare et quantae sit Ecclesiae interpretatio necessitatis quantique momenti in plena luce collocare valebit" (par. X).

*Divino afflante Spiritu**Instructio*

the defense and honor of the church.³⁶

the judgment to be exercised by the ecclesiastical magisterium, and to the defense and honor of the church. (Par. XI)

What emerges here in the text of the Instruction is some of the new insights and experiences of Vatican Council II, similar to the awareness expressed by Pope John Paul II in his address at The Catholic University of America in 1979.³⁷

Exegetes are finally urged to be ready to submit to the directives of the magisterium, never to forget that the apostles filled with the Holy Spirit preached the good news, and that the evangelists were inspired so that they were preserved "from all error." This final exhortation is supported by a quotation from Irenaeus. So end the directives to the exegetes.

Directives for Professors of Scripture in Seminaries and Similar Institutions

The directives addressed to scripture professors in seminaries and similar institutions (par. XII) consist of an exhortation to teach scripture in a way that the dignity of the subject and the needs of the time require. Coming immediately after the directives to the exegetes, who have been encouraged to pursue a form-critical and redaction-critical interpretation of the gospels, this exhortation implies the seminary professors' duty to cope with the same methods and to engage in the same research. Indeed, this is part of the "needs of the time" (*temporum necessitas*), and such professors cannot ignore them. In reality, the distinction made between exegetes and

seminary professors in this Instruction is largely abstract; the exegete is invariably a professor in a seminary or a similar institution. When, however, the seminary professor is not engaged in this research, such a situation cries out for reform.

The Commission, however, insists that the use of methods of literary criticism is not an end in itself. They must be used to bring out the meaning of the gospel passages intended by God through the sacred writers. The professor is above all to emphasize the theological or religious teaching of the gospels, and literary criticism is to serve only as a means to set forth the theological teaching of the evangelists.³⁸ Those whom seminary professors are training are future priests and future ministers of the church, for whose lives and work the scriptures must be the source of perennial vitality.

The exhortation in par. XII is predominantly positive. The only negative element in it is a warning against the pursuit of the literary criticism of the gospels as if this could be conceived of as an end in itself.

Directives for Preachers

In the case of preachers the Biblical Commission first insists on their preaching of "doctrine," appealing to 1 Timothy 4:16 (par.

38. In the light of these directives it is difficult to understand how some interpreters today can recommend that one abandon the historical-critical method of interpreting the gospels. All through the Instruction it is clear that the modern Catholic exegete and seminary professor are counseled to ascertain and explain what the intention of the inspired writer was and what meaning his message has for people in the world of today. The Instruction has not envisaged more recent fads and trends in interpretation, such as structuralism, or those in hermeneutics, such as the recommendation that what is important is not the intended meaning of the author but what the text, having acquired an autonomy of its own, so it is alleged, may mean to readers today. If there is not a radical homogeneity between what it meant and what it means today, then the latter cannot be called "the Christian message." How a concern for the latter and a disregard of the former can be called serious literary criticism is baffling.

36. *AAS* 35 (1943) 319; *EnchBib* §565; the translation is from *RSS*, 102.

37. See my discussion in "John Paul II, Academic Freedom and the Magisterium," *America* 141 (1979) 247-49.

XIII). The first strong, negative directives of the entire Instruction appear here: "They are to refrain entirely from proposing idle and insufficiently established novelties." This prohibition, however, has to be properly understood; for immediately afterward the Commission itself allows for the cautious explanation of "new opinions already solidly established." The problem is obvious. There cannot be a double standard of truth, one for exegetes and seminary scripture professors, and another for the faithful. If I am correct in my understanding of this Instruction, then the recognition which the Biblical Commission has given to literary forms and to the sane use of form-critical and redaction-critical interpretation of the Gospels would put the results of such study under the "opinions already solidly established." They are indeed to be explained to the faithful. But whether one does this in the pulpit, as a preacher at the liturgy of the word, or in an instruction class, is a matter of prudential judgment.

The directives to preachers end with another caution: they are not to embellish biblical events with imaginative details scarcely consonant with the truth.

Directives for Those Who Publish for the Faithful

The same prudence demanded of preachers is now required of all those who would write on biblical subjects at a popular level (par. XIV). They are to concentrate on the riches of God's word and are to consider it a sacred duty never to depart from the common teaching and tradition of the church. They are to exploit, however, the findings of modern biblical research, yet avoid "the rash comments of innovators." A "pernicious itch for novelty" is not to lead them to disseminate unwisely what are only trial solutions to classic difficulties.

The Commission further recalls (par. XV) that books and articles in magazines and newspapers on biblical subjects are to be carefully scrutinized by ordinaries (i.e. diocesan bishops and similar superiors).

Directives for Biblical Associations

Directors of biblical associations or societies are to follow the norms for such gatherings laid down by the Biblical Commission on a previous occasion (par. XVI).³⁹

Conclusion of the Instruction

The Biblical Commission notes in conclusion (par. XVII) that if all the directives set forth in its Instruction were to be followed, then the study of sacred scripture in the church would greatly contribute to the benefit of all the faithful. It ends with a quotation from 2 Timothy 3:15–17, the classic New Testament passage setting forth the purpose of "all scripture divinely inspired."

Final Remarks

The significance of this Instruction of the Biblical Commission is best understood, on the one hand, in the light of events which had been taking place in the Roman Catholic Church either shortly before its publication in 1964 or contemporary with it, for it was issued during the course of Vatican Council II and all that that meant for the church. As one looks back at that time from the early 1990s, one can see even greater significance.

Shortly before the publication of the Instruction there emerged a rather bitter strife between some professors at the Lateran University in Rome and those of the Biblical Institute, which centered on aspects of the problem with which the Instruction was eventually to deal, "new investigations" (*novae investigationes*, par. X) of the gospels and other biblical books. That strife need not be rehearsed here,⁴⁰ but it was unfortunate because it obscured the important issue of the historical truth of the Bible.

39. *EnchBib* §622–33; *RSS*, 168–72.

40. See my article, "A Recent Roman Scriptural Controversy," *TS* 22 (1961) 426–44.

In addition, there were mixed reactions, reported from all over the world, to the new trends in modern Catholic biblical studies. Conservative ecclesiastical circles, in Rome and elsewhere, sought, and still do seek, to commit Catholic interpretation of the gospels to fundamentalism.⁴¹ In this context, the well-nuanced position that the Biblical Commission took in this Instruction is of greatest importance. It not only did not espouse any form of fundamentalism, but gave, in effect, official sanction to many of the new trends in biblical study, and especially in gospel study.⁴²

41. The first draft of the schema *De fontibus revelationis*, prepared by the theological commission for discussion at Vatican Council II, contained two paragraphs which incorporated the terminology of the *monitum* of the holy office (1961) and leveled anathemas against those who would call in question the proper historical and objective truth of the words and deeds of Jesus *prouti narrantur*, "as they are recounted." These paragraphs were eventually rejected along with the rest of that schema. See J. Ratzinger, "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: Origin and Background," *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* (5 vols.; ed. H. Vorgrimler; New York: Herder and Herder, 1967–69) 3 (1968) 155–66; cf. A. Grillmeier, "The Divine Inspiration and the Interpretation of Sacred Scripture," *ibid.* 199–246; B. Rigaux, "The New Testament," *ibid.* 252–61 (esp. pp. 258–59 on the eventual rejection of a papal suggestion to use *vera seu historica fide digna* instead of *vera et sincera* [which was eventually retained]). In contrast to the original schema, what appears in *Dei verbum* §19 is rather a brief summary of the Biblical Commission's Instruction (see p. 163 below).

42. Though the main directives of the Instruction have been addressed to exegetes, it is evident that dogmatic theologians and others also have to reckon with the directives of this document. We smile today in retrospect at the confidence behind the remarks directed against a professor at the Biblical Institute in Rome in the year 1962, which stated that "there exists a numerous and fairly articulate group convinced that the four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles are genuine and objectively accurate historical documents, which can be used as such legitimately in the science of apologetics. These individuals insist that they have reason to hold and to teach that the events set forth in these books took place in the very way in which they are described in these works. They hold that the words and the deeds attributed to Our Lord were actually uttered and performed by Him . . ." (J.C. Fenton, "Father Moran's Prediction," *AER* 146 [1962] 192–201, esp. pp. 194–95). Not only is such a view of things contrary to the Instruction of the Biblical Commission, but it displays a naïveté that seems never to have heard of the synoptic problem, not to mention form criticism and redaction criticism.

However, the silence of the Commission about certain matters raises several questions. *First*, practically nothing is said in the Instruction about the synoptic problem, i.e. about how the synoptic gospels are related to or dependent on each other (see p. 9 above). True, in dealing with the redactional work of the evangelists, the Commission admitted that they had used a "method suited to the peculiar purpose which each set for himself," and selected, synthesized, explicated, or transposed accordingly. Obviously, the Commission did not want to take sides in the debate about the solution to the problem, which is so contested today.⁴³ This knotty problem will probably never be solved to the complete satisfaction of everyone, and the Instruction leaves the debate on this issue open. But the silence of the Commission on this question has made some of its statements sound like an over-simplification, as non-Catholic readers of the Instruction may notice. How can one discuss the problem of the historical value of the gospels without assuming, or at least recognizing, some position in this matter? In speculating about the reasons for the silence of the Commission in this area, I have already suggested that the Commission apparently thought that it could give directives in a way sufficiently generic so as not to close debate on solutions to the synoptic problem.

Second, there is the question of the reinterpretation of the words of Jesus by the evangelists in their redactional work. It has often been suggested in recent times that the evangelists have put on the lips of Jesus a fuller form of sayings than his *ipsissima verba*, or

It is evident, however, that recent dogmatic theologians, in their discussions of christology, have actually been seeking to cope with the thrust of the Instruction. See W. Kasper, *Jesus the Christ* (London: Burns & Oates, 1976) 26–40; E. Schillebeeckx, *Jesus* (New York: Seabury, 1979); *Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

43. See further my article, "The Priority of Mark and the 'Q' Source in Luke," *Jesus and Man's Hope* (Perspective Books 1; 2 vols.; Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1970) 1. 131–70; reprinted (in revised form), *To Advance the Gospel* (see n. 27 above), 3–40.

that certain verses are to be regarded as the redactional addition(s) of the evangelists. We may cite the Matthean additions to the beatitudes,⁴⁴ and to the "Our Father," or the exceptive phrases in the divorce texts of the gospel tradition,⁴⁵ or even the very knotty problem of Matthew 16:16–19.⁴⁶ Significantly the Commission has not come out against such views in Catholic biblical studies in an otherwise comprehensive statement on the "historical truth of the gospels." Indeed, the Commission is undoubtedly hinting at *this kind* of redactional activity involved in the reinterpretation of the words of Jesus, when it says: "From the many things handed down they selected some things, reduced others to a synthesis, (still) *others they explicated as they kept in mind the situation of the churches*" (par. IX, my italics). Such an unfolding, explanation, or explication of traditional material for the situation of various local churches has to be reckoned with. For instance, the addition of the exceptive phrases in the divorce texts of Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 may well reflect a marriage problem in an early Christian community, predominantly Jewish Christian, but being infiltrated by converts from the Gentile world already in marital situations for which the evangelist expresses an exception (cf. Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25).⁴⁷ The attitude re-

44. Compare Luke's "Blessed are you poor" with Matthew's "Blessed are the poor in spirit," Luke's "Blessed are you that hunger now" with Matthew's "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for uprightness," etc. See the admirable treatment of this question by J. Dupont, *Les béatitudes* (see n. 28 above), 209–27; also M.M. Bourke, "The Historicity of the Gospels," *Thought* 39 (1964) 37–56; J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke* (AB 28–28A; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981, 1985) 631.

45. See my article cited in n. 27 above, esp. pp. 87–89.

46. See now R.E. Brown et al. (eds.), *Peter in the New Testament* (n. 28 above), 83–101; cf. A. Vögtle, "Messiasbekenntnis und Petrusverheissung: Zur Komposition Mt 16, 13–23 Par.," *BZ* ns 1 (1957) 252–72; 2 (1958) 85–103; T. de Kruijf, *Der Sohn des lebendigen Gottes* (AnBib 16; Rome: Biblical Institute, 1962) 82; E.F. Sutcliffe, "St. Peter's Double Confession in Mt 16:16–19," *HeyJ* 3 (1962) 31–41.

47. See P. Benoit, *L'Évangile selon saint Matthieu* (La sainte Bible [de Jérusalem]; 3d ed.; Paris: Cerf, 1961) 121; H.J. Richards, "Christ on Divorce," *Scr* 11 (1959) 22–32; cf. n. 45 above.

flected in the Instruction toward this type of problem is most significant.

Third, in a church document on the historical value of the gospels one would have thought that something would have been said about the historical character of the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke. The debate about this part of the gospel tradition was already a live one within Roman Catholicism before the Instruction was issued and before the debate on inspiration and inerrancy at Vatican Council II. The silence of the Commission on this matter, especially in its treatment of Stage I of the gospel tradition, is eloquent indeed.⁴⁸

Fourth, most noteworthy in the whole document, when all is said and done, is that *the Biblical Commission has calmly and frankly admitted that what is contained in the gospels as we have them today is not the record of the words and deeds of Jesus in the first stage of the tradition, nor even the form in which they were preached in the second stage, but the form compiled and edited by the evangelists*. This form, however, reflects with a certain fidelity the two previous stages, to be sure, and the second more than the first.

For the believing Christian and scholar, it is important to note that the evangelists' redacted and edited form of the sayings and deeds of Jesus is the inspired form. The evangelists were moved by

48. The same would have to be said about *Dei Verbum* §19; cf. R.E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977) 562, esp. n. 11.

For another view of this matter, see J. Redford, "The Quest of the Historical Epiphany: Critical Reflections on Raymond Brown's 'The Birth of the Messiah,'" *Clergy Review* 64 (1979) 5–11. The "critical reflections" amount to nothing more than another gratuitous assertion about the historical character of the annunciation, summed up in a question to boot: "... what is more feasible than that he [Luke] had to hand on a tradition, oral or written, of the infancy of Jesus whose original source was Mary, whether she was personally with Luke or not at the time of writing?" (p. 9). Alas, a rhetorical question is no basis for historicity or for what is "feasible."

the Holy Spirit to compile, edit, and write down the accounts as they did. This inspiration guarantees their gospel-truth, which is free from error.

It is good, however, to recall that neither the church in its official pronouncements about the nature of inspiration nor theologians in their speculative elaborations have ever taught that the necessary formal effect of inspiration is historicity. The consequence of inspiration is inerrancy in affirmation, i.e. immunity from error in what is affirmed or taught in the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation (see *Dei Verbum* §11). The opposite of such error is not simply historicity, but truth. Yet truth in a literary text is analogous to the literary form used (see n. 34 above). If a passage in the gospels contains historical truth, it does not simply contain it because it is inspired. The reasons for its historical character will be quite other than the inspired character of the text. Inspiration may indeed guarantee such historical truth as is there, even as it would guarantee the poetic truth of what is affirmed in the hymn to Christ in Philippians 2:6–11. The guarantee is not quantitative, but qualitative and analogous. This has to be stressed even when something is narrated in the past tense under inspiration. The first question which confronts the interpreter in such a case as Mark 14:52 (“and he [the youth] left behind the linen cloth and ran away naked”) is whether that statement is meant to record an historical event (real naked flight) or to convey symbolism (the utter dereliction of Jesus by his followers); similarly for Mark 15:38 (“the veil in the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom”).

Lastly, the inspired truth of the gospels was intended by God in his providence to give us not simply a “remembered” account of the life and teaching of Jesus, but a “preached” form of it, “so as to offer the church a basis of faith and morals” (par. X).

The Instruction of the Biblical Commission has by no means put an end to all the problems regarding the historicity of the gospels. Discussion of them has continued and will certainly carry on, but now with much more freedom. The Instruction has occasioned

a number of commentaries on it. We append a list of the more important ones as an aid to further study of it and of the problems to which it is addressed.⁴⁹

49. Anon., “Instruktion der päpstlichen Bibelkommission,” *Kirchenblatt für die reformierte Schweiz* 120 (1964) 233–34; A. Bea, “La storicità dei vangeli sinottici,” *CivC* 115/2 (1964) 417–36; “Il carattere storico dei vangeli sinottici come opere ispirate,” *ibid.* 526–455 (both reprinted in book form, Rome: Civiltà cattolica, 1964; reprinted again with an Italian translation of the Instruction, *La storicità dei vangeli* [Brescia: Morcelliana, 1964]; cf. *The Study of the Synoptic Gospels: New Approaches and Outlooks* [New York: Harper & Row, 1965]); F.W. Beare, “The Historical Truth of the Gospels: An Official Pronouncement of the Pontifical Biblical Commission,” *CJT* 11 (1965) 231–37; W. Beilner, “Zur Instruktion der Bibelkommission über die historische Wahrheit der Evangelien,” *BLit* 38 (1965) 3–5; “Die Geschichtlichkeit der Evangelien,” *BLit* 40 (1967) 159–76; R. Cardinalis, “Bijbelcommissie en Evangelie,” *Revue ecclésiastique de Liège* 50 (1964) 271–81; J. Delorme, “La vérité historique des évangiles,” *L’Ami du clergé* 74 (1964) 554–59; M. Didier, “Liminaire [à l’Instruction],” *RDioNam* 18 (1964) 309–12; A. de la Fuente, “Documento alentador para los estudios de la Biblia,” *Ecclesia* 24 (1964) 1103–6; E. Galbiati, “L’Istruzione della Commissione Biblica sul valore storico degli Evangelii,” *BeO* 6 (1964) 233–45; “L’Istruzione della Commissione Biblica sul valore storico dei Vangeli,” *ScCatt* 92 (1964) 303–310; “L’Istruzione sulla verità storica dei Vangeli e l’insegnamento nei seminari,” *Seminarium* 18 (1966) 66–91; S. González de Carrea, “El metodo histórico-redaccional en los evangelios sinópticos,” *Natura et gratia* 11 (1964) 205–25; W. Harrington, “The Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels,” *IER* 103 (1965) 73–87; F. Hoyos, “Historia e historias: A propósito de la instrucción de la Comisión Bíblica,” *RevistB* 27 (1965) 67–73; J. Kahmann, “‘De historica evangeliorum veritate,’ Een nieuwe Instructie van de Bijbelcommissie,” *Nederlandsche katholieke Stemmen* 61 (1965) 46–51; C. Kearns, “The Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels: Some First Impressions,” *Ang* 41 (1964) 218–34; O. Knoch, “Über die historische Wahrheit der Evangelien . . .” *BKirche* 19 (1964) 146–50; N. Lohfink, “Die Evangelien und die Geschichte: Zur Instruktion der päpstlichen Bibel-Kommission vom 21. April 1964,” *SdZ* 174 (1964) 365–74 (reprinted, *Theologisches Jahrbuch 1966* [Leipzig: Benno, 1966] 240–48); (an abridged Swedish form appeared in *Credo* 46 [Uppsala, 1965] 29–33); J. Losada, “La verdad histórica de los Evangelios: La instrucción de la Comisión Bíblica,” *SalTer* 52 (1964) 612–24, 673–83; R.E. Murphy, “The Biblical Instruction,” *Commonweal* 80/14 (1964) 418–20; J.A. O’Flynn, “Instruction of the Biblical Commission,” *ITQ* 31 (1964) 240–46; M. Peinador, “Sobre la reciente instrucción de la Comisión Bíblica,” *Ilustración del clero* 57 (1964) 718–24; J. Radermakers, “Instruction du 21 avril 1964 sur la vérité historique des évangiles: Commentaire,” *NRT* 86 (1964) 640–43; R. Rouquette, “De Rome et de la chrétienté: L’Instruction de la Commission biblique,”

The text of the Instruction itself follows.⁵⁰ After it will be found a translation of *Dei verbum* §19, which restated in a brief conciliar form the teaching of the Instruction of the Biblical Commission of 1964, and, significantly, not that of the *monitum* of the Holy Office of 1961.

Etudes 321 (1964) 105-10; E. Ruckstuhl, "Die Wahrheit der Evangelien: Erläuterungen zur neuen Instructio der Bibelkommission," *Schweizerische Kirchenzeitung* 132 (1964) 297-99; M. Sabbe, "Een nieuwe Bijbelinstructie," *ColBG* 10 (1964) 413-19; R. Schnackenburg, "Über die historische Wahrheit der Evangelien: Instruktion der päpstlichen Bibelkommission," *TheolGeg* 7 (1964) 197-209; A. Stöger, "Die historische Wahrheit der Evangelien: Kommentar zur Instruktion der päpstlichen Bibelkommission vom 21. April 1964," *TPQ* 113 (1965) 57-79; J. Díaz y Díaz and P. Termes, "Evangelios y comisión bíblica," *Enciclopedia de la Biblia* (6 vols.; Barcelona: Garriga, 1963), 3. 299-305.

50. The numbering of the footnotes of the Latin text is generally preserved; occasionally it has been necessary to reverse two of them because of the English word order. Words added in parentheses do not appear in the Latin text; they have been supplied for the sake of the English. See nn. 16 and 23 above. For some strange reason the references to the encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu* are given in the Latin text of the Instruction to the Italian translation of the encyclical in *AAS*; I have changed them to the corresponding pages of the official Latin text.

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