DIALOGUE AND ENCOUNTER
An Approach To The Scriptures
by
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1. The subjects with which I am going to deal are difficult subjects. They have to be hard subjects because they touch life where it bleeds. They are therefore not matters which we can touch lightly, a skop and go business. Anything that anyone has to say here is something that must come out of the anguish of life. I can't and don't pretend then to have answers. All that I can hope to do is to communicate a bit of my own enthusiasm and try to tell you the way in which the New Testament is really a New Testament for me.

2. Although I have been professionally as well as devotionally concerned with the New Testament for many years, I can truly say that it has never been for me so new a New Testament as it is now. It has never seemed to me so rich in insight and in understanding, so provocative, so bafflingly powerful, so alive as it does in this present time. As it stands over against me, summoning me at every point to decide whether I will understand myself in terms of the world or in terms of God, whether I will order my life in faith and radical obedience. I know that it is truly God's eternal word. It hurts too much not to be God's word. For it tells me the truth about myself. It pricks and jabs. It stings and smarts. And as it destroys me, it builds me up. As it brings me down to death, it makes me live again. Moreover, it does this in its own way, which is not my way. Not by answering the questions which I put to it, but by asking me questions by way of reply to my questions. I am, therefore, under no necessity of approaching the Bible as a fixed body of final and infallible doctrinal propositions. I do not now need to regard it as a comprehensive and complete set of moral rules, nor yet, as a setting forth, once and for all, of a divinely ordained pattern of ecclesiastical order. I think I know something of what Paul meant by his bold and brazen affirmation: 'For I through the law, died to the law, that I might live unto God.' We must be equally bold and brazen to say: 'For I through the New Testament died to the New Testament that I might live to God.'

APPROACHING THE SCRIPTURES

3. In introducing you to the subject which I wish to treat, 'Dialogue and Encounter,' I want to read to you a passage from the Old Testament. I shall, on the whole, be dealing with the New Testament, but I think some of the things can be more clearly illustrated out of the Old Testament. So I want you to read the first thirteen verses of the third chapter of Genesis: "Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the Lord has made. He said to the woman, 'Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?'" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons. And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him 'Where are you?' and he said,'I heard the sound of Thee in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.' God said, 'Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, 'The woman whom thou gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit

of the tree, and I ate.' Then the Lord God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent beguiled me, and I ate." '

4. Now that you have read this scripture what are you going to do with it? You know that actually snakes are not more subtle than any other wild creature. As a matter of fact, they are fairly stupid. You know that snakes don't talk, and that they never did. I am afraid of them, but it isn't because they say 'BOO!'Furthermore you know that there never could have been carried on between a snake and a woman any such conversation as here recorded. You know also that in the botanical world there is not now, nor was there ever, a miracle tree, which would either make mortal man immortal, or reduce immortal man to mortality. Trees themselves, like men, are subject to the laws of birth, growth, decay and death, and in spite of their possible great longevity, they too crawl in beside their roots and die. You know also that there is no tree of knowledge of good and evil. The knowledge of good and ev il and the distinction between the two is not so easy to come by as the eating of fruit. And what tree can make us like God? Again, take this marvelous conversation which follows between God and the man and the woman. If you had been there with your tape recorder -- but if you had been where? There is no "there" or "where." This has nothing to do with geopgraphy. Don't fuss about where the Garden of Eden is or was. There wasn't any such place. This garden is not in space-time. So if you'd been there with your tape recorder, you'd have heard nothing. In this sense, God doesn't talk any more than snakes talk. And He is much less visible.

5. Now having gotten rid of the misplaced literalism in the interpretation of the narrative, I want to push a generalization to its extremes. The primary importance of all conversations in the Bible does not depend on whether they are what we call of fictitious origin, or of what we call historical origin. It does not depend on when or where or by whom they took shape. These conversations may have come from anywhere geographically, or from anywhere in the Bible, between Genesis and Revelation. Their primary meaning for us does not depend on whether they occur in J,E,P or D, or whether they occur in Mark or Matthew or whether they come from Q or Luke or Protoluke or any other named or unnamed source which literary historians may posit as the basis of our Scriptures. Their worth does not depend upon whether the origin is Palestinain or whether it is Hellenistic. Rather the conversations of the Bible are of primary significance only if and because they move us up into significant encounter. And encounter, that which makes us aware of our own life, means dialogue. I am concerned here to say, that the very essence of human life is and must be dialogue and encounter; encounter and dialogue.

6. The power of the Bible over us is due to a very great extent to the fact that from the beginning to the end it is made up of dialogues which reach out and inescapably involve us. Paradoxically enough, the dialogues are in us before they are in the Bible. These dialogues which are in us and in which we are, are always three-directional. First, it is a dialogue between me and myself. It is also a dialogue between me and my neighbor. And it is a dialogue btween myself and God. These are endless dialogues, which cannot stop as long as I remain alive. Yet for the most part we remain unaware of them and hence never really live. Surely one of our most important functions as Biblical interpreters is to get the Biblical dialogues out of the Bible, first into ourselves and then into our world. And to make sure that this triangular nature of dialogue is always maintained.

A STUDY IN DIALOGUE

7. Now let us examine our study in terms of dialogue. First, between me and myself; and then between myself and my neighbor; and third, between myself and God. This dialogue was in me before it was in Genesis, and when I read it in the Bible, I see myself mirrored in it - myself, as standing before and under God. If this then is a dialogue between me and myself, I am the snake. The snake is not outside of me. The snake is inside of me. And I, the snake, say to myself:'Did God say you shall not?' And myself says to me:'God did say you shall not, or you shall die.' Then I say to myself: 'Don't you say this to yourself every day?' 'God doesn't really mean what He says. And anyway, why don't you try Him out? The risk may not be as great as it appears. You know: nothing risked, nothing gained. And it could turn out to your advantage.' Myself needs only a little encouragement from me to enable myself to see that the forbidden fruit is good for food, a delight to the eyes, and even a desire of the mind, for what is wrong with being wise? So, I eat, and I give my neighbor to eat, and in so doing I close the gap between me and myself and between me and my neighbor; I smother out the dialogue, so that neither am I in dialogue with myself, nor am I in dialogue with my neighbor. We are fully integrated. There is no me in myself; there is no me in my neighbor; and there is no me in God, because I have brought the dialogue to an end. I have shut it up. I have closed it.

8. This is not the end of the story. Something has gone wrong. I am too wise. I can see too much. I didn't think I looked this way. I can't be this kind of person. I'd better cover myself up. I'm not fit to be seen as I am. Here I sit, naked, before myself, before my neighbor. Naked and defenseless in the presence of God. So I must prepare myself a wardrobe, consisting of masks. Here, a switch occurs. Up to now I've been the snake. In the same sense, I must henceforth be the Lord God in the story. It is beginning to look as if I cannot escape myself. If I close up the dialogue on the snake's side, it breaks out on the God side. We will, so we say, flee from the presence of the Lord God. We shall hide. But it is of no use. The Lord God will open up the dialogue. He will flush me out. He will call to me in my hiding, and with a loud voice he will say, 'Where are you?' Not because he does not know where I am. Not because I do not know where I am, but just because I do know where I hide myself. (For I always hide myself in the place where I hadn't ought to be). The Lord in the story calls because it is only in the dialogue that I can effectively hear the question 'Where am I?'

9. But the story is still not through with us. We have not yet had the dialogue between myself and my neighbor. When God says to me, when I say to myself, "What is this that you have done;" Myself, the man, replies: "The woman thou gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree and I ate." While myself, the woman, says: "The serpent beguiled me, and I ate." Once again, man or woman, I will try to close the gap and to bring the dialogue to an end by brash but unconvincing self-deception, absurdly insisting to myself that I am not the man you think I am. I am not the man you are looking for. Yet, I cannot get away with this. This is not really a way out. For even the woman is bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh. And as I am the snake, I am also the woman. There is no way I can put responsibility for my sin on someone or on something outside of myself. From this standpoint, there is no outside of myself. I do not deceive myself. I do not deceive God. Finally, there is no way out in cleverness of repartee, such as: "The woman thou gave me." Nor can I escape the dialogue by blaming myself on another: "I am what you have made me."

KEEPING THE DIALOGUE OPEN

10. Our basic human problem, then, is how can we keep these dialogues open which we are always trying to close. There is no redemption for man as an individual, and for man in society, unless the three dialogues are kept open. They are there, but we do

not know how to live with them, so we strive to escape them. I was fascinated by Colin Wilson's The Outsider as in his effective and, I think penetrating fashion he was able to describe a whole galaxy of persons whom he describes as outsiders; whom I should like to describe simply as persons who will not let the dialogue die, who feel that it is of utmost importance to keep the dialogue open. For to close it with any kind of happy, ready solution is the way of death. And I have to say that for myself now using the language in the manner Wilson uses it -- who may be as we say, outside the faith, and there is certainly some sense in which this is true, but they are persons who keep the dialogue alive.

11. A Dallas paper gave the most ridiculous review of Albert Camus' novel, The Fall. It accused him of not giving an answer to the question of life. Now does it sound dreadful of me to say that I don't care whether or not this man has an answer to the question? Maybe it's better not. Maybe it's better that the outsiders have not become insiders. We become insiders too easily, too quickly. We tend to destroy life by becoming insiders prematurely. So I am going to say that I think that the only exciting manifestations of life and thought in the contemporary world are coming to us out of people who insist that the dialogue is open, and that--I wonder if they have learned this from the Bible--only as we keep it open, only as we can increase and not decrease the significant encounter areas of life and thereby maintain the dialogue, can we understand either the Bible, or the Christian faith, or life itself.

12. The Bible is peopled with these kind of characters, folk of never-ending encounters and ever open dialogue. God speaks to them most powerfully when he bumps into them, so to speak. I worry a little bit about the words that we sing in such a hymn as "He walks with me, and He talks with me, and He tells me I am His own," because I vigorously object to this easy was of managing the situation. Jonah runs away from God, and when he takes a ship for Tarsus, he finds that he bumps smack into God. And how do you explain this fantastic language in the accounts of the conversion of Paul now? How do you explain this, esxcept as a way of trying to get down in a language what it means for a man to bump into God himself; that is, to meet him in the encounter situation, which opens up dialogue. In the dialogue situation, we argue with God, talk back to God, if you wish. I like the way Jeremiah finds fault with God straight out to his face. No meek submission here. No mousiness here; but man maintaining the dialogue with God, even on to the end. From the standpoint of dialogue, think of the words "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" How wonderful that Job did not obey the advice to "Curse God and die." He kept the dialogue going.

WHAT THE WRITER SAYS

13. Now I am going to suggest that in order for us to keep the dialogue alive in us, as the dialogue in the Bible confronts us, that we must approach the Bible in a certain way. It is a perspective of dialogue and encounter and is a matter of utmost importance. In doing this, I'll not be trying to tell you new things or different things, nearly so much as I'll be trying to reshape the things which you already know and which you have already worked with. Let us see if we do not find this perspective more significant than the perspectives which have dominated the study of the Bible over many decades.

14. A very broad foundation has been laid for us in the schools of Biblical studies of the 19th and 20th centuries. These studies have cut away much brush and left us with four basic questions with which we can and do approach scripture: 1) What do the writers say? 2) What actually happened? 3) What do I say? 4) What is said to me, or What does God say? I wish to make the case that while all of these questions are legitimate and important, the first three are subordinate to the fourth, and that such an approach makes possible the continuation of significant encounter and dialogue.This is to say that this way of handling the material opens the possibility of God bumping into the reader.

15. In approaching the scriptures then, we first of all ask the question: What do the writers intend to say? What do the texts intend to communicate? This point of view has been pursued for a century or two. And men have devoted an incredible amount of time and concern to the answering of this question: What is said? I think this is an important question. That is why I am interested in the problems of text, the problems in philology, patterns of thought, meanings of language, symbols, parable, metaphor, allegory, myth, all of the scientific methods of going at the understanding of the Bible, which have produced what we call "literary" or "textual" or "form" criticism. They have a very important place. But I want to get over it.

16. If anyone thinks that this is the be-all and end-all of the study of Scripture, it seems to me thatsomething has died somewhere. Why do we ask this question of what the texts intend to say? Why do we care what the New Testament writers meant to say? Wherein is our obligation to find out what people two thousand years ago said? Is it simply because of what they said? Well, I am going to suggest to you that it isn't. It's not our primary concern. It's for our own sakes that we have to ask this question, not for their sakes. We have to understand people as they meant to be understood, as they wanted to be understood and not to force ourselves on them. We must not intrude into their private lives with our opinions, saying "This is what I believe, and this is what you must believe." I ntegrity demands that we attempt to discover, impartially, what Matthew, Mark, Paul, John and Luke have to say-- to allow them to speak for themselves. And this is a significant enterprise and basic to the major question, but it is not an end in itself. To make it such, to stop here, is but to create an idolatry out of the past and hence to snuff out the dialogue of life, making genuine encounter impossible. The question of what the writers have to say is necessary for, but subordinate to, the basic concern which we must and do bring to the Bible.

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED

17. The second question that we address to the Bible is: What happened? What were the primary impulses, the orginial events? What really occurred? Now there is such a thing as <u>happenedness</u>. I have no patience with people who try to deny this. It is important for us toaccept the fact of happenedness, that which is outside ourselves. The reason why it is important for me is that here is one significant term, if you please, in the encounter situation. God speaks to me precisely in the encounter situations which I do not set up.

18. Yet I don't know how to decide what <u>happenedness</u> is, in an event. There is no event in which, if I describe it at all, I myself am not involved in it in some way or another. So there is a sense in which it doesn't make any sense for me to talk about objectivity. The historical interpretation of the Bible is the approach which has dominated the schools for a century and a half. I have entered fully into it; and so far as I see it to be significant, I continue to work in it. Yet I am not nearly as interested in this perspective as I once was. It seems to me that in this approach to the study of history, the really important questions drop through the meshes. Finally, I always come back with this: suppose I were able to reconstruct with infallibility the sequence of events which had to do with the establishment of the Christian faith and the Church, all the events in terms of cause and effect, which took place in the first century, I would still have to say "so what?"

19. Hence when I deal with the <u>happenedness</u>, objectivity, historicity, as it concerns the events described in the New Testament and try to set this out, apart from my own prejudices and desires, I must not make an idol out of them. I must not worship this effort. It is not the end for which I am seeking. It is not the major issue or the primary question. When we make the recovery of the <u>objective</u> occurrence the <u>ultimate</u> concern, we are not only up a blind alley, we have also made the encounter situation

impossible and cut off the dialogue of life. This question, at most, can only be a preparation for the important question.

WHAT WE SAY

20. The third question which we bring to the scriptures is: "What do we say?" Now I am going to say that we have to take ourselves seriously. I have to say "God made me." Nobody would guess this by looking at me, but I'm under responsibility, as a creature of God. I cannot avoid saying, in this relationship, "I am." We all know how hard we try to melt into other people, and how we can't; how we're thrown back on our lonesome ness, on our isolation, on our own selfhood. We know that finally we must either affirm ourselves and say "I am" or else find some illusion about life in which to die. So under God I <u>have</u> to ask my own questions, questions which are peculiar to me, which perhaps nobody else can ask, because nobody is quite identical with me. I have to stress again, we <u>have</u> to ask <u>our question</u>. We cannot deny ourselves, even in the presence of scriptures. We are obligated to let Jesus be Jesus, to let Paul be Paul, to let John be John, and to let Matthew, Mark and Luke be Matthew, Mark and Luke, and not try finally to superimpose our views upon them, but let them say their say. But under God, we are also obligated not to deny ourselves but to affirm ourselves. If I cannot deny them, neither under God, can I deny myself. This is not because I am God. It is just because I am I. In fear and trembling, I have to say: God made <u>me</u>. Of course this is effrontery, this is presumption. The man who is in faith is always presumptuous. Again if I must make the wedge between what the Biblical writers say and the historical substrata which is finally hidden from all eyes, I must also be willing to see the wedge between the first century man and the man of today.

21. We have to accept the responsibility for being 20th century people. Under God we have to accept this responsibility and to ask questions as 20th century people. So if you say to me: You do not believe that Jesus was born of a virgin, but of a human father, not because you are a 20th century man but rather because you are a sinner, I can only say, "I am certainly a sinner." But I have to go on to say that I am the kind of sinner who cannot believe in this. We can feel that we cannot bear this responsibility of living in the 20th century. Nevertheless <u>now</u> is our time, and it is our only time. It may be a burden to bear, as living in any century is a burden, but in faith we can go on and say it is a gift. Our gifts are not to be apologized for, they are to be received, and used, in fear and trembling but courageously. So our question, what do we have to say to the Bible, is important. This is still not, however, the major question in approaching the scriptures.

WHAT GOD SAYS TO US

22. The fourth of our questions is: what is said to me by the writings? What does God say to me out of the complex of the other three questions? This fourth question I have asked last, but it is the most important of all questions. The other questions have significant meaning only as they can be brought to bear upon this fourth question and therefore must be subordinated to it. What is important as I read the Bible is not that, in the first place, I obtain the answers to the subordinate questions. I may know little or nothing about what they are concerned about. I may have no system of theology by which I can gather together or organize material. Our students at seminary always have to write papers on their creeds, 'What I believe.' I'm sure this must be a profitable exercize, but in a way this is a dreadful thing. At any rate, it is not nearly so important to ask ' what shall I believe' when I read the scriptures, as to ask 'what do I <u>hear</u>, what do I <u>see</u>, what do I <u>learn about myself</u>, what do I learn about myself in relation to myself, in relation to my neighbor, and in relation to God?' This is the way I want always to handle - not simply the Bible - but every human expression which comes out of the total history of the world anywhere, any time, then or now, there or here. I want to bring these all into this encounter situation.

23. This approach to the Bible means that I am ever asking, as I read, how am I involved in the situation? Am I Cain, and am I also Abel? Am I Jacob and Esau both? The supplanter and the supplanted? The murderer and the mudered? Are both these kinds of people in me? Yes, they are. Personally, unless I see this when I read the scriptures, I can't understand how the rest of the questions matter at all. If we read the Bible in such a fashion that it just displays for us so many wicked people and so many good people, if it doesn't really say anything to us -- I can't see how the Bible matters much if something important doesn't happen to me in my situation. Now what do you say about that? Some of you probably want to ask, "Well, what about the historical perspective? Isn't it sufficient? Isn't it once and for all?" Well, sufficient for what? Sufficient to raise me from the dead? It really doesn't mean anything, does it, to say that a once and for all historical revelation is sufficient when nothing happens to me. Here is a situation where it isn't helpful to think of sufficiency apart from man as he is alive in his own situation. This is the only way, so far as I can see, to get the matter out of antiquarianism, academicism, sentimentalism, and phantasy, and to get it into the lives of us, who are here and now, acting, and whose destiny depends now on what we hear in our inner being.

24. Now I submit to you, the wirtings of the Bible are written from this point of view. When we read them from this perspective we are reading them from their own perspective. For instance, in the accounts of the betrayal, and the last supper, whether there is a shred of taped, stenographic, historical recording in these accounts, I cannot say either way. This matters from the standpoint of the historical approach but it doesn't from the standpoint of encounter and dialogue. Answer the objective problem if you can, but when you have done that, you will have to say, insofar as the central concerns of life are involved, so what? I cannot otherwise read this than with the question of what is said to me. The document will not let me read this otherwise. This isn't anything I do; it is done to me. I read these accounts and hear,'One of you shall betray me.' and I'm stopped. Why can't I get past it? Of course it doesn't need to go on. I know who the one is. I'm the one. I don't worry about Peter and Judas or any of the rest of them. That's all ancient history. Then the story goes on and I must go on with it. Presently someone asks a question, and the person isn't named. Do you think that's not intentional? The person who is not named says, 'Is it I?' Why, that's my question! The importance of the dialogue is not in relation to the original participants. The importance of the dialogue is that I am involved in it. It is my dialogue. Wherefore, the overwhelming passages of power in the Gospels and these dialogues? Why? Because I cannot escape identifying myself. The encounter is present to the reader. The dialogue within him is disclosed as he is involved in the dialogue of the scripture, and he lives.

BROADENING THE ENCOUNTER POINTS

25. All of this means that encounter points must be broadened and not reduced and the dialogue must be kept forever open. This of course applies to the Bible. For instance, here are the evangelists, four presentations of the gospel, four portraits of Jesus Christ. What shall I do, shall I say, "All of these must be reduced to a single integer?" Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are all the same? And shall I reduce four encounters to one encounter? In the interests now of melting down and smoothing out and of easing the situation and of closing the dialogue -- shall I do that? Shall I say that all the evangelists must at every point agree or that Jesus must agree with the evangelists and reduce all the encounter points to one? Why, yes, if I am looking for something unimportant to do. No! I shall not do that, unless I want to impoverish life. This goes even further. What shall I do with the people who are outside the faith, as we say, the people to whom the Bible does not speak? Shall I wipe them off as unimportant, insignificant to our situation? Or should I recognize them as being in the list of saints also? I'm willing to. Once again I suggest that our fourth question is the primary question, fundamental to all authentic living: "What is God saying to me out of this complex?"

26. Encounter points are everywhere in potentiality and the dialogue is everlasting. Now I ought to admit, that I used to believe that the dialogue ought to be brought to an end; that there must be an answer which would stop the questioning, destroy the encounters, reduce the tensions and bring life all down to some flat level in which all problems would be solved. Closing the dialogue is behind every attempt to discover some overarching pattern, some vast reason in the total scheme, whereby the totality of man's life would be integrated into some kind of seamless robe. This push towards monism in us, call it what you will, which drives us to try to explain everything with some kind of unitary principle is a deep-lying need in the human soul. I have great sympathy for these human needs which have expressed themselves in the great systems. But the great system, whether it be philosophical or theological, brings the dialogue to an end and eliminates significant encounter situations. That is to say, the system is but an idol of our fabrication for ourselves which changing, moving and dynamic life will destroy, as surely as it destroys all idols that men make with their hands.

27. I now believe that life is questions, not final answers, life is dialogue and encounter, not the system. The perspective which I have described, I maintain, is the one which is best adapted to set free what the Bible will say to our contemporary world. Ingiving the primary emphasis to the fourth question: "What will God say to us out of this complex?" I don't mean to be turning aside from difficult historical questions, philosophical or theological questions. I do want to be removing the grave clothes which prevent the Bible from getting out and walking in the history of our time recreating the world, making people to know that God is the God who raises the dead, who makes the things that are out of the things that are not, and who is <u>Lord of Life</u>.