CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CONTINUITIES IN SCHOLARSHIP: THE WORK OF NILS DAHL*

The scholarship of Nils Alstrup Dahl, Buckingham Professor of New Testament Criticism and Interpretation at Yale, cannot easily be pigeonholed. For one thing, the scope of his work defies neat systematization, and for another, while he would deny it, the erudition he displays in working in as many areas as he does, makes impossible demands on any one person who would dare to offer an assessment of his scholarship. Hence, what follows is simply an attempt to give a highly selective yet representative account of his work.

Professor Dahl is no narrow specialist. He has worked most extensively in the Gospels and the Pauline letters, and is writing an eagerly awaited major commentary on Ephesians. The Festschrift recently published in his honor is entitled *God’s Christ and His People*, signaling his abiding interest in Christology and ecclesiology, but as the editors of the volume note, his contributions go far beyond these two areas. In addition to his basically exegetical studies, he has engaged in the theological and hermeneutical discussions of the last three decades, made important contributions to textual criticism and the history of the NT canon, explored the history and interpretation of Jewish and Christian Scriptures, closely examined such newly discovered materials in the areas of the history of religions as the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Gnostic writings from Nag Hammadi, and written major book reviews and masterful assessments of the status of research on Acts and on form critical studies of the Pauline letters. He has also found time to serve, with advice and instruction, not only his own and the ecumenical church, but his students and colleagues. His writings, always mercifully free of jargon, have a commonsensical element about them that have made them, for a large part, useful to non-specialists.


1 Some of his essays have been published in three volumes: *The Crucified Messiah, and Other Essays* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974); *Jesus in the Memory of the Early Church: Essays* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976); and *Studies in Paul: Theology for the Early Christian Mission* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977).

Ever wary of overarching schemes or grand syntheses, Nils Dahl does not represent any school of thought, nor has he attempted to develop a following of his own. He is always eager to learn, even from his students and junior colleagues, whom he fondly credits in his publications for insights he only thinks he received from them. What he provides then is no Dahl school or viewpoint, and certainly no ephemeral glamor or faddishness, but an example of someone who faces “all the historical facts of the case openly and without apologetic manipulations and then (does not) take offense.” They learn from him to respect the evidence and to treat it responsibly without allowing an awareness of the importance of methodology to make methodology an end in itself, or to allow oneself to become its captive. The work starts, for Dahl, with that curiosity which underlies all science and leads to continually new treatment of a problem. (“Detect” is a favorite word of his.) His method is basically exegetical, for he is convinced that “exegesis was—then as always—the means whereby contemporary ideas could be connected with sacred texts and traditions.”

Since he has not felt compelled to construct a system of his own he has tended to write on particular themes and texts. Yet his work has not been that of a learned dilettante, without any overall coherence or theological interest. It is not satisfactory simply to characterize his work as conservative, as is sometimes done. Such a label means different things to different people. It is more accurate, and certainly more useful, to describe Nils Dahl as someone who is aware of and impressed by continuities. One sees this, first of all, in the manner in which he proceeds in his writings, where problems are invariably taken up with a perspective informed by the history of the discipline, but are then treated in terms of the available evidence. The generalization may also hold that he works with a presupposition of continuities in the materials; for example, a continuity between the historical Jesus and the faith of the early church. It is not unnatural that a generation that had itself experienced crises and discontinuity should also find them in the sources of early Christianity. It is to Nils Dahl’s credit that he has not succumbed to the temptation to place the emphasis there.

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3 For the context from which the quotation is taken, see n. 18 below.