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FUTURE BIBLE TRANSLATION
AND THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH

Introduction

From a person who was shaped by a German academic tradition you would surely expect a number of prolegomena—some of you might even be disappointed if these introductory remarks do not form the main part of my presentation.

I will limit my remarks to two predictable points.

First, you all realize that it gives me a special advantage and disadvantage to present the last paper in this series of lectures.

The real advantage is that I was able to listen and partially absorb what was said over these past two days. I did constantly add to or modify my own set of notes as our symposium proceeded.

The disadvantage is similarly obvious: what I have here now is a highly provisional mixture of what I had thought and written in advance, and of the new highlights and aspects which this encounter has brought to our attention. So, rather than giving you a well balanced and pre-fabricated view on future Bible translation and the future of the Church, I am here with a number of preliminary responses to our discussions, and with an attempt at drawing some conclusions which, I assume, will ask for further work, further defining, refining, and redefining.

Prolegomenon Beta: From a speaker who comes from Stuttgart, where Hegel was born, you can expect that all material—his own as well as what he picked up during the meeting—will automatically organize itself in three parts ("Er sagt es klar und angenehm, dass erstens, zweitens, drittens kàm... "). I am under the impression that there were indeed three major areas of topics—or "Themenfelder"—which emerged time and again during our discussions. Namely first: what is the character of the Bible and its effect on those who meet and read it? To me this is a phenomenological consideration: how does the Scripture by the very way it is structured state conditions for its study and understanding? What about its diversity and its unity? "De natura Scripturae" might a speaker have called this chapter some centuries ago.

The second major cluster of topics centers around current forecasts on the growth of the church into the next millennium. Which role will the translation of the Bible, from what we can see in the past two centuries, most likely play in the development of the Church in the future? To me, this is a missiological consideration.

These two aspects, taken together, lead to a third field of questions: we are challenged by the symposium to understand better the correlation between Bible translation and the growth of the Church in order to outline a number of concrete
tasks which arise from the fact that we are about to move on to a new and basically different situation. What can we do, what are we supposed to do? This is a consideration of strategy.

Part I

The Character of the Bible and Its Implications

1.1. The character of the Bible

We all agreed that the book that we translated has a distinct character. Let me illustrate it by saying what the Bible is not: not a systematic presentation of Christian doctrine, a "summa theologiae" (which the Fathers of the Church could well have sifted out of all parts of Scripture in order to make this systematical, topical presentation the fundamental statement of faith). The Bible is not a harmony of Christian teaching, nor a historical outline, a "history of salvation".

Just remember the many illustrations which were presented here in all papers for the diversity of the material which we encounter in the Bible. "Not a book, but a library". The ancient Church, when deciding on the canon, wanted people to have four Gospels, not a "life of Christ", but a collection of four different presentations of the teaching and the person of Jesus, the Christ, each written for a different audience and under a different main aspect of the message. And the second main section in the New Testament is a collection of letters, again with a variety of recipients, a variety of authors responding to a variety of situations and challenges. Add to this the Old Testament, which has the same literary character of a collection of heterogeneous materials combined only by the common theme of reflecting God's actions to reveal himself, and human responses to this revelation. All of this gives us a highly complex compendium of texts with a variety of theologies, all interrelated, all part of a whole, but with various layers and emphases.

So any person who opens the Bible will encounter a complex collection of statements by various human speakers and writers, all of which, like a symphony, are but one voice in a tapestry of sound.

The history of the world and of faith in this world is reflected in the Bible and cannot be ignored. On the contrary: the better we understand a message in its own historical and cultural context, the better we understand its meaning within the entirety of the biblical message, and so its meaning for today. Far from darkening or even destroying the substance of the Bible, scholarly historical analysis of the setting from which the biblical texts originated illuminates their meaning.

This is not a deficiency of the Bible. It is the consequence of an act of God without which we would be ignorant of him: it is a consequence of his incarnation, his readiness to let human beings speak about him. The Bible is the result of God's decision to enter his own creation in order to be met by his creatures.