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# HERRMANN'S *COMMUNION OF THE CHRISTIAN WITH GOD*: CONTRIBUTIONS TO AN EVANGELICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE IMPORTANCE OF EXPERIENCE AND THE "INNER LIFE" OF JESUS?

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Reference to the name "Herrmann," for a few, brings to mind a television sitcom of the early 1960s. For others it may evoke a designation of the root of evil that brought forth the Barth and Bultmann program.[1] For still others the name identifies the nineteenth-century German Biblical scholar and theologian of Marburg. Johann Wilhelm Herrmann engaged in critical work and attempted to give to his modern age the basis for the Christian's communion with God. This, he said, was in terms of "positive expositions of that inner life which we know to be a Christian reality . . . which is common to us all."[2] Herrmann's gift of positivity to his age, the agency of Jesus, and a new reality for the Christian can be seen as a ship bearing a precious cargo appearing on the horizon of nineteenth-century thought critical of Christianity. It is not the intention of this essay to play the role of arbiter of Herrmann's liberalism but to penetrate his ideas and thought on the subject of religious experience and assess the merits his circuitous contributions might make to us on the evangelical shore of religion in our conceptions of religious experience.

## I. HERRMANN'S PLACE IN THE HISTORY OF THEOLOGICAL IDEAS

The *Communion* is a religious exhortation written in an allaying spirit—apologetic, but conciliatory with the times. Herrmann sails in the wake of such great ships as Kant and Schleiermacher.[3] Before him these

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[1] These two students came to a place of divergence from their *paidagogos* as we note in Barth's letter to Bultmann that their "ships were merely ships that passed in the night" (letter from Münster, 5 February 1930, cited in *Karl Barth—Rudolf Bultmann: Letters, 1922-1966* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981] 49-50).

[2] J. W. Herrmann, *Der Verkehr des Christen mit Gott* (Stuttgart and Berlin: J. G. Cotta'sche Buchhandlung Nachfolger, 1903); English translation *The Communion of the Christian with God* (New York: Putnam, 1906) 18.

[3] Other prominent theories contributed during the nineteenth century regarding religious experience include G. W. F. Hegel's concept of the cultural *ethos* found in his *Philosophy of History* (New York: Colonial, 1900); L. Feuerbach's donation of *Mythos* and imagination in his

carried a weighty cargo of intellectualism and concern about the truth of the everlasting pronouncements. He writes in a time when there were placed on one side the demands of the rational theologians of *Religionsphilosophie* that religion be justified in the realm of general science and on the other the orthodox exigencies to adhere to the traditional creedal statements as the object of faith. He avoided what he perceived as being both parties' common confusion regarding faith.

In relation to Schleiermacher and Kant, Herrmann kept his distance from both. Aspiring after the infinite, they remained detached from the historical. Schleiermacher scarcely escaped mysticism, while Kant detoured to a metaphysic of morals. Herrmann also navigated so as to clear the beckoning labyrinths of the older tradition, disagreeing on several points and making these dominant in his work: (1) The objective power behind experience is not a sum of thoughts about faith but the man Jesus; (2) the thoughts of faith arise within the communion with God into which the personal power of Jesus lifts us; (3) it is not the sum of thoughts of faith, even if they are Biblical, that makes a person a Christian but the faculty (or the "how") of producing such thoughts.

Several important ideas are offered by Herrmann in the preface to his fourth edition of 1903. First, Herrmann does not chart an open course for the virgin sea but offers that we must steer a middle course between the deceptive Scylla of reducing the gospel to mere ideas, which "do not transform us," and the precarious Charybdis of embracing "all that is reported or taught in the New Testament," which makes the gospel a law.[4] The challengers venturing an alternate tack on the left and right of him will sink lest it be shown to them that "the basis of faith can only be what produces faith as the inward experience of pure trust" created by a personal Spirit "when we listen to the sacred tradition of the Christian community."[5]

Second, we note the Bible's prominence in Herrmann's thought. By no means an inerrantist, he nonetheless proposed that the Scriptures are properly revered when they are investigated "in their historically determined reality" and when "they are used . . . to seek out the revelation of God."[6] For the Christian the Bible ought to be "the means by which with his own vision he lays hold of the Person of Jesus."[7]

Herrmann's introduction to the present situation of Protestant theology addresses the scientific and orthodox of his age. His proposal? "He today

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*Essence of Christianity* (New York: Harper, 1957); J. Royce's community unveiled in *The Problem of Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1968); and the religious *a priori* of E. Troeltsch in "Empiricism and Platonism in the Philosophy of Religion," *HTR* 5 (1912) 401-422.

[4] Herrmann, *Communion* viii.

[5] Ibid. ix.

[6] Ibid. x.

[7] Ibid.

who is willing to see, can find the way which, even in a world altered by science, leads those who seek God to Christ."[8] This salvation, counseled Herrmann,

> can be expected only from a reawakening within the minds of those who have lapsed from the Church of an intelligent reverence for the Bible which has been degraded in the Church to a rule of doctrine. . . . Now this can only happen in so far as they observe that the Bible itself, instead of making an inhuman demand on us, offers us an incomparable gift. When it becomes clear to them that the *Bible introduces us to a marvelously vivid personal life that compels us to self-examination*, that shakes us up, that humbles us, and yet that also fills us with comfort, joy, and courage, then they will look away beyond all that has hitherto been strange and repellent in this tradition to the redeeming vision of God that they see dawning there.[9]

Herrmann's belief in the Biblical call for self-examination should be understood in terms of a stratagem against the rugged individualism of his day.[10] His place in the history of theological ideas and his own locale presented him with a Kantian challenge.[11] It was Kant who was the old weighty anchor that had to be raised in order for the new Herrmannian ship to sail.

Herrmann's plea, on the other hand, was for a critical self-judgment that would potentially result in an exchange of the self-life of self-sufficiency for the Christ-life, a losing of the self-life to find the Christ-life. He presented to the recalcitrant mind the opportunity to no longer be self-conscious but to become Christ-conscious. According to Herrmann, one must begin with the one saving fact, the personal life of Jesus.

[8] Ibid. 1.

[9] Ibid. 6 (italics mine).

[10] In Germany we would take note of the individualistic thinkers Goethe, Fichte and Schlegel; in England, Coleridge and Carlyle; and in America, Emerson and James. Presumption that individualism died on American soil would be preposterous. Its swell can be seen from W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1902) 501, who pointed out to the Gifford Lecture attendees of 1901: "You see now why I have been so individualistic throughout these lectures, and why I have seemed so bent on rehabilitating the element of feeling in religion and subordinating its intellectual part. Individuality is founded in feeling; and the recesses of feeling, the darker, blinder strata of character, are the only places in the world in which we catch the real fact in the making." From this point to the many popular "self-help" ideas we find in the marketplace for the benefit of the personalities and egos of today individualism is alive, well and thriving.

[11] A reported unfriendly presence of neo-Kantians of Marburg posed at minimum a tolerance of the sacred opulence of human life but was highly suspect of the Church's stewardship of it. Their preference was instead the proclamation of life as the development of the freedom, individuality and self-expression of the individual. Immanuel Kant's lectures to his students bear this out. Their augmented notes, which took the form of *Eine Vorlesung über Ethik* (ed. P. Menzer; Berlin: 1924; English translation *Lectures on Ethics* [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1963]), have Kant saying, "We must do what is in our power; we must do what we ought; the rest we should leave to God. That is true submission to the divine will. . . . Faith, then, denotes trust in God that He will supply our deficiency in things beyond our power, provided we have done all within our power" (p. 95).

## II. THE AGENCY OF JESUS

This is the basis for "personal Christianity." It is "a communion of the soul with the living God through the mediation of Christ."[12] In the face of critical examination by the skeptics of his day, Herrmann offered that "we must believe," that the possibility even exists for a personal Christianity "in spite of wrong teaching, and (that it) can remain alive amid obsolete ecclesiastical forms."[13] The Herrmannian "true objectivity of Christian knowledge" that must be "protected by clear views concerning the life of faith" thus assailed the suggested Schleiermacherian subjectivism to the cultured despisers of religion. As the young apologist said in his earliest writing:

> The sum total of religion is to feel that, in its highest unity, all that moves us in feeling is one; to feel that aught single and particular is only possible by means of this unity; to feel, that is to say, that our being and living is a being and living in and through God.[14]

Herrmann attempted to overcome this age's subjective disposition by various kinds of pleas to objectively given facts. He began by launching out and unfolding his "thoughts of faith" (*Glaubensgedanken*), at the heart of which stands the figure of Jesus.

We ought not to suspect Herrmann to be found standing in the assembly of the mystic. He will not ascend the elevated ziggurat looking for God. His age was absorbed in the concept of interiority, the inner unanalyzable certainty. Even though he grants that "the inner life of religion is a secret in the soul,"[15] he escapes the charge of *Mystik* by proposing that the "Christian has a positive vision of God in the personal life of Jesus."[16] For Herrmann this grounds the Christian in history:

> We are Christians because, in the human Jesus, we have met with a fact whose content is incomparably richer than that of any feelings which arise within ourselves—a fact, moreover, which makes us so certain of God that our conviction of being in communion with Him can justify itself at the bar of reason and conscience.[17]

Herrmann much prefers this certainty over a deficient mysticism. The latter places Christ in a dispensable role where, at the highest point of the inner life, one no longer has to do with Christ but with the ineffable God. The former is a curious conviction under the rubric of religious experience. Even though the mystic may subscribe to the most orthodox of formulae regarding Christ and though he may couch the description of his escala-

[12] Herrmann, *Communion* 9.

[13] Ibid. 10.

[14] F. Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (New York: Harper, 1958) 49-50.

[15] Herrmann, *Communion* 19. It "cannot be handed over from one to another," he says. "Each individual must experience it for himself as a gift from above."

[16] Ibid. 33.

[17] Ibid. 36-37.

tion up God's mountain in the highest Christological terminology, the mystic in the last analysis desires asylum beyond the historical and specific figure of Jesus in eternal union with Deity itself.

Neither can Herrmann rely upon the profession of dogma to communicate a salvific communion with God. What is common in Catholicism with the absolutizing of dogma, and in Protestantism with confessions of faith, has presented a polarizing theological liability. He persistently reminds us that the object of faith is the revelation of Jesus Christ himself, not the credo of the Church. True faith has to do with Jesus Christ himself, not with a doctrine about him. The doctrine points to him—its aim is to show him and to make him obvious and perceptible before the eyes of men. The revelation is Jesus Christ himself, not a doctrine about Jesus Christ. In one's thoughts of faith Herrmann encourages the transition toward Christ, the object, away from self:

> The thoughts of others who are redeemed cannot redeem me. If I am to be saved, everything depends on my being transplanted into that inner condition of mind in which such thoughts begin to be generated in myself, and this happens only when God lifts me into communion with Himself.[18]

"Communion with God" means that "God speaks clearly to us, and also hears and considers our speech in His operations."[19] To give confirmation of this communion, God makes himself known. How? Not by giving information about himself but by a fact that is both part of and apart from our experience.

> God makes Himself known to us, so that we may recognise Him, through *a fact, on the strength of which we are able to believe on Him*.... Now we Christians hold that we know only one fact in the whole world which can overcome every doubt of the reality of God, namely, the appearance of Jesus in history, the story of which has been preserved for us in the New Testament.[20]

Thus the encounter of the man Jesus as an undoubted reality is the reality through whom "we are first lifted into a true fellowship with God."[21] Jesus is the dramatic experience of God in the life of the believer. With the words of Schleiermacher in his ears that "history immediately and especially is for religion the richest source ... (and that) religion begins and ends with history,"[22] Herrmann came much nearer to the truth of this assertion and definitely saw more clearly how it could be implemented for theology as, apparently, Schleiermacher had not seen. Considering at this point the element of the reality of Jesus and the importance of history for the believer in the thought of Herrmann, combined with the element of transition from focused individualism to

[18] Ibid. 42.
[19] Ibid. 57.
[20] Ibid. 59 (italics his).
[21] Ibid. 60.
[22] Schleiermacher, *Speeches* 80.

Christ-centeredness, we have come upon what potentially constitutes a religious experience of an evangelical genre, an experience of personal Christianity.

When we speak of religious experience it may sound to one *extra muros ecclesiae* that we are using the word "experience" as it appears in the phrase "business experience." More suitably, however, is the understanding that only through the religious grid can we uniquely interpret a multiplicity of experiences found in one's life. Of these personal experiences the interpretation of being religious proves to be more steadfast, enduring or accurate than any other assessment. Aside from merely placing them under the rubric of religion, they can additionally provide a meaning for living to which a person adheres in the face of all difficulty. What makes them Christian, for Herrmann, is not only what one experiences but also how one has a personal religious experience. Having drawn some important conceptual distinctions, do we find in Herrmann the essential Christian element of the sense of being forgiven? What about the vitally important factor to religious experience of an act of commitment to God? How does this apply in Herrmann's presentation?

## III. THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSONAL RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

The importance of the person Jesus was underestimated by many of Herrmann's contemporaries. This is the revelation that can influence those who sense the need for unconditional dependence or trust and that is the most important sphere of reality on which to reflect. Herrmann rose to the challenge of objectively searching out a protected harbor for faith to rest and to guarantee faith's access to God's revelation in the historic, Biblical Christ. "It is only out of life in history that God can come to meet us. . . . In that historical environment which ought to give our personal life its fullness, there is no fact more important for each individual than Jesus Christ."[23]

The question arises, however, as to whether the real fact is the tradition about Jesus and not Jesus himself. But, as Herrmann has suggested, do we not rely upon the preserved NT records for our data and cognizance of Jesus? "It is true that we should have no certain knowledge of Jesus if the New Testament did not tell us about him."[24]

> But given this . . . the narrative which comes to us, either by word of mouth or in writing, is not the only fact which we incorporate into our picture of historical reality; the content of those narratives may also become a fact for us. This happens only when we can ourselves establish its reality, and we may do this in various ways.[25]

[23] Herrmann, *Communion* 65.

[24] Ibid. 67.

[25] Ibid.; the "picture" or portrait/image (*Bild*) of historical reality or of Jesus is what is inserted into one's *Weltanschauung*.

Herrmann points out that how one experiences personal Christianity in its most basic form is to extend a confidence in the trustworthiness of the narrator to that which he narrates. To treat the words as testimonies of human experience with the Divine, understanding them as interpreting the mind of the Master who had pronounced on one of the first confessors the benediction, "Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven," is to place sufficient trust in their authoritativeness. As Rousseau also confessed, he is proved by the quite unique character of the picture that defies all invention. Is he not even more proved by the narratives of eyewitnesses, which show that the portrait is not a free sketch but a transcript drawn from reality? Further, it ought to occur to us that the decision we make to hold the Biblical report as a fact

> proceeds from our own independent activity, and is based upon that which we regard as real at present exactly as the decisions of historical criticism are. It is thus perfectly clear that we are quite in a position to detach the content of a narrative both from the narrative itself and from its author, and to regard it as an element of the reality to which we have to adjust our lives.[26]

Therefore any skepticism[27] over the figure of Jesus to the point where he ceases to exercise religious influence is unthinkable for Herrmann. Certainty as to the fact of the person of Jesus rests not on historical judgment but on the influence of Jesus himself. Through his dealings with the NT, being confronted with the problem of making historical judgments that are of only probable correctness and that may be dismissed by ongoing scholarly investigation, Herrmann held that

> no historical judgment, however certain it may appear, ever attains anything more than probability. . . . Here Lessing is right. If, notwithstanding all this, the person of Jesus is so certainly a fact to us Christians that we do see in Him the basis of our faith, and the present revelation of God to us, this conviction is not produced by a historical judgment. The calmness with which Christendom holds by the historical reality of Jesus has certainly not been won by the forcible suppression of historical doubt. Any such effort would be made contrary to the dictates of conscience, and it would give no man peace. It is something quite different which removes all doubt from the picture of Jesus; if we have that picture at all, we have it as the result, not of our own efforts, but of the power of Jesus Himself.[28]

Therefore starting from the records and seeking to experience Jesus' power over ours culminates in the recognition that he is the best thing our life contains. The experience of his power that is present and at work in us is what Herrmann means when he says that "the inner life of Jesus

[26] Ibid. 71.

[27] This, as it may generate from the results of historical criticism, is insignificant since it does "not give us facts on which our religious faith could be based. Hence it is quite explicable why historical criticism of the sacred records is so much disliked in many quarters" (ibid. 69).

[28] Ibid. 72.

becomes part of our own sphere of reality."[29] This personalization is what makes Jesus himself, and not merely his story, a real thing for the believer. Jesus is the revelation[30] of God whose character also makes certain the reality of the God who is not only his but ours and who so loves us that in communion with him he forgives us our sins.[31] This personal religious experience of God's forgiveness includes "the thought that God Himself can be none other than that Personal Spirit who acts upon us through Jesus."[32] It is this God-originated assurance, or what Herrmann calls "the actual experience of redemption," that is

> created in us because the Man Jesus has made us feel the power and grace of God turned towards us. In such case we experience the rise of this *confidence as a transplanting into a new existence*; and then only does it follow that we give up all attempts to win satisfaction by our own activity for our craving for fellowship with God.[33]

Herrmann, in attempting to set forth the real communion of the Christian with God, has asserted that one must be placed into the state of mind in which such thoughts are provoked or engendered. How does this occur? Simply when God lifts us into communion with himself.[34]

> As (the Christian) becomes conscious of the new reality into which he has come, his life in fellowship with God unfolds itself in the thoughts of faith concerning that reality.... We desire to show (that) those thoughts arise in the course of communion with God in the Christian soul that has been set free to enter into this experience.[35]

The objective ground for Herrmann's personal Christianity—his "what" upon which or whom he will anchor the certainty that God does in fact commune with us—rests, first, with the actuality of the person of Jesus as an element and force in our own sphere of reality.[36] Second, crossing the wake of Kant, he holds that the fact that "we hear within ourselves the demand of the moral law"[37] is objective ground of the Christian's consciousness that God communes with him/her. When we experience God in the power of Jesus this demand takes the form of a personal life, so that doing good is no longer a painful problem but begins to be "the very atmosphere in which we live."[38] It appears that Herrmann

[29] Ibid. 74.

[30] Ibid. 97-99.

[31] Ibid. 99.

[32] Ibid. 127-128. Herrmann does not have much to do with the Holy Spirit and his role in religious experience.

[33] Ibid. 160 (italics mine).

[34] Ibid. 42.

[35] Ibid. 40.

[36] This resembles the thought of James, *Varieties* 64, the variety of which is nineteenth-century experientialism: "We may now lay it down as certain that in the distinctively religious sphere of experience, many persons (how many we cannot tell) possess the objects of their belief, not in the form of mere conceptions which their intellect accepts as true, but rather in the form of quasi-sensible realities directly apprehended."

[37] Herrmann, *Communion* 103.

[38] Ibid.

espouses an awakening of the historical facts within the Christian that leads to or resonates a moral life within the believer.[39] The moral life, moral experience or expression of conscience that occurs in the *Communion* is faith working itself out in conduct that "itself belongs to the communion of the Christian with God."[40] For Herrmann this resonant experience is a Christian commitment where something from the believer is tied to the object of faith for the believer. This is not to say that Herrmann espouses the reduction of personal religious experience of the inner life to a commitment of a predominantly moral nature.

> Simply to desire the good cannot be counted communion with God. But only if the Christian's active interest in his duties puts him in the attitude . . . whereby he seeks to fulfill the command to love his neighbour as himself, does a man live under the Fatherly rule of God or commune with Him. In such activity the Christian must lose the impression that the law is a burden, and feel that duties are rather a gift from God which makes his heart rejoice.[41]

Herrmann's objectification is complete. No other objective ground exists for him, and these are sufficient, he thinks, to keep the beginning of a personal religious life from being "a purely subjective experience."[42] In our post-modern age our struggle is, as Herrmann's was, against the tide of subjectivity and individualism, mysticism and dogmatism. The importance of personal religious experience of which Herrmann gives positive explanation is bound with the affirmation that the subjective experiences of a personal Christianity cannot be alienated from the objective source that draws us into such experiences, nor can they be isolated from the thoughts that Christian doctrine gives expression to as its object and content of faith.

Herrmann's regard for the historical character of revelation as being the source for the "inner life of Jesus," however, does not escape being an experientialism. Apologetically speaking, experiencing the influence of Jesus can mean, detrimentally, that the inner life as a saving fact is the result of an apparent objectivity being established and grounded by a subjectivity. Nonetheless in Herrmann's mind he has advanced a positive theology that has revealed the inner life that is a Christian reality. He gave to his modern age the only one objective support needed: the undeniable fact of the "inner life of Jesus," which begins with the personal life of Jesus as the real criterion against which we adjust our lives. And the importance of this living reproduction of Jesus in believers, as they know and can see in themselves, to which they can compare the picture with

[39] Herrmann here contends with the force of Kant upon this age. Kant's reduction of religion as morality applied to God and the interiorizing of a moral disposition that points in the direction of religion were very exalted ideas. Herrmann suggests that "in the inward attitude, whereby he seeks to fulfill the command to love his neighbour as himself, does a man live under the Fatherly rule of God or commune with Him." Compared to Kant, however, these ideas did not encompass as much for Herrmann.

[40] Herrmann, *Communion* 320.

[41] Ibid. 298–299.

[42] Ibid. 105.

what they read, is further bound up with the grand assertion of Jesus' prominent place in the series of historical influences that have molded the world, by which in Christian experience we are equally affected.

Discussion on the subject of religious experience can cause a severe case of Heideggerian *Angst* among us evangelicals. While we affirm that experience can never provide a reliable vehicle for assessing the truth of what we believe, it is my opinion that if we were to place ourselves in the hypothetical role of agents for an historical customs bureau the portions of Herrmann's cargo discussed herein might be inspected at the dock and abandoned on our shore by some. But let us not partition off and sequester his interpretation of religious experience as not constituting a significant part of the life of a believer. That definite inward change in the individual inner life, which every Christian has gone through as he himself knows it, and which thus knowing it he has traced up to God, began with some level of antagonism to Christianity. It was succeeded by an experience or consciousness of harmony with it. Through a reversal in the poles of existence, from self-centeredness to Christ-centeredness, through the all-embracing, all-transforming principles of faith, Christ's word dominates our convictions, regenerates our affections, and remolds our active desires and purposes, so that it is a compendious description of our new life to say, "I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me."

We would agree that the tendency of personal religious experience could be to run into self-confidence and individualism, but this is balanced and checked by a wider induction. And the inerrant Scriptures remain the higher rule than even generally consenting testimonies of Christians. Our rule of faith and practice, which ascertains our harmonies of experience, stands before us awaiting our continued study. When Kant in 1781 published his *Critique of Pure Reason*, he dedicated it to Baron von Zedlitz, the minister of public instruction in Prussia. The Baron wrote him: "I have not been able to understand all that is in your book, and I feel that I need some instruction from yourself. I am like a student who sits too far from the desk, and my notebook (*Heft*) needs to be corrected." So, too, churches and Christians make a bad *Heft* by sitting too far from the teacher's desk, for when their experience is too little based on one original it admits too little of mutual recognition. When we come back to the Word of God and listen to the sacred tradition of the original Christian community who experienced the living God, the Spirit of Christ who copies it variously in us can make our unities increase and give us the sense of "this effectual working in the measure of every part" to necessarily go forward to the edifying experience of the whole in love. As part of the evangelical philosopher of religion's task of communicating the reality of a personal religious experience of Jesus and describing of what it consists, Herrmann's conventions warrant close inspection. If we learn anything from Herrmann, his attitude of openness and dialogue with his contemporaries and the history of ideas rather than a posture of defensive retreat or self-imposed isolationism would be a beneficial lesson for us in the evangelical Church of today.