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**Revelation and Research:  
A Study of  
H. M. Kuitert, *Do You Understand What You Read?*  
and  
J. W. Montgomery, *Where Is History Going?***

**Robert C. Newman**

## **Introduction**

The relationship between the Bible and the areas of history and science has provoked much controversy for over a century. Recently this question has been debated within evangelical circles also. This paper attempts to discuss two recent and important works in this field, one by H. M. Kuitert and the other by John Warwick Montgomery. For each book, I shall give an outline of its contents, summarize its arguments, draw out some of its author's propositions, and analyze them. In concluding, I hope to give some propositions of my own which have arisen from this study.

Since I will refer to just a few different works, a shorted form of reference will be used. This will consist of a capital letter to identify the work, followed by numbers to indicate the specific pages.\* These will be given in parentheses in the text.

### **Kuitert, *Do You Understand What You Read?***

The first book we wish to consider, by H. M. Kuitert of the Free University of the Netherlands, just appeared in English translation within the past year. The title may seem somewhat vague (it is actually a quotation from Acts 8:30), but this seems to be in keeping with the style of the book itself. Basically, the book is a popular treatment of Biblical interpretation. As the author notes in his Foreword, the method he uses in presenting his ideas is that of dialogue with the reader, especially of raising questions for the reader to consider.

## **Outline**

We can sketch an outline of the book by listing its chapter titles:

1. Understanding and Interpreting the Bible
2. God Speaks and Is Spoken Of

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\* H. M. Kuitert, *Do You Understand What You Read?* Translated by Lewis B. Smedes. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970 (hereafter K); George E. Ladd, "Faith and History," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 6, no. 3 (1963) (hereafter L); John Warwick Montgomery, *Where Is History Going?* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969 (hereafter M).

3. The Time-Bound Bible and How to Understand It
4. The Time-Bound Bible and Its Authority
5. The Purpose of the Bible
6. Where Does the Purpose Begin and End?
7. Scripture Is Its Own Interpreter
8. The Bible and Science
9. Conclusion

Let us now look at Kuitert's presentation in some detail.

### **Summary**

In chapter one, Kuitert states that most people feel we should accept the Bible for what it says. This sounds like a good principle, he says, but in practice we all understand some passages literally and some figuratively, and our real principle seems to be to keep the interpretation we are accustomed to. Next Kuitert asks whether all Bible commands are to be obeyed, and then he shows that many have been superseded. Another question, "Are the Bible writers concerned for historical precision?" is answered somewhat negatively by citing examples from Kings, Chronicles and the Gospels. Kuitert infers from this that the writers are preaching, and that they have *reshaped* the details of their narratives to suit their purposes. This conclusion, which is gaining popularity in Reformed and Catholic circles, is not to be understood as an attempt to undermine Biblical authority, says Kuitert.

The author then uses the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 to extract four principles: (1) the Bible must be understood if it is to function; (2) the Bible must be interpreted if it is to be understood; (3) the work of the Holy Spirit is being done in and through all that men do; and (4) the purpose of Scripture is the proclamation of Jesus Christ. Concerning this last principle, Kuitert feels many people get involved in contradictions, attempted harmonizations and legalism because they separate Scripture from its single purpose.

In chapter two, Kuitert amplifies this last point. Many people who fully accept the Bible misunderstand it. They do not recognize this special character of the Bible, forget that it was written in Hebrew and Greek, and have a tendency to want God to do things differently than he actually does. We must realize that the Bible uses time-bound language:

God came to be spoken of and spoken to, not in the language of some super-time (for no man knows such a language), but in a particular language of a particular time ... The time-bound Bible is not a regrettable concession; it is the only kind of Bible men could have. It is necessarily bound to time; and this fact is a mark of its authenticity as a revelation of the covenant-partner God (K, 29).

This revelation of God is of Himself as a person and is not merely propositions about himself. This does not mean that an interpreter may say anything about God and it be true, but it does mean that God creates his image in our world through his promises and acts:

... God breaks through our vagueness and our errors and show us His own recognizable "image" through His words of promise and His deeds of fulfillment (K, 30).

The problems of sin and calamity would make his image ambiguous, except that we have it unambiguously in Jesus, says Kuitert. It is important that we recognize God working in our world today. His past acts and promises in the Bible tells us what we may expect. Yet because Paul's picture of the world in his time is smaller in size than even that of children today, Kuitert feels we must bring the works of God into "new and inventive expression" for today (K, 33).

Chapter three further discusses what Kuitert means by time-bound. The Bible writers lived in an entirely different culture than we do. To understand them today, we must do more than just explain their figures of speech. They actually took the firmament to be a dome overhead, and they also believed in a literal first couple, Adam and Eve. These ideas fit their time but not ours, says Kuitert. Bible interpreters are also time-bound. Thus Joshua 10 was long understood to teach that the sun revolves around the earth; this is an example of how an interpretation can become obsolete.

Now that we have new light on this question, continues Kuitert, we see that faith in Christ does not depend on the existence of Adam:

It is not Adam, not a theory about the Bible, but the message of Jesus Christ that makes Christians of men. That is why faith is not changed if Adam is shown not to have been an historical person ... (K, 40).

Thus Paul used the Rabbinical typological method in Romans 5, treating Adam as a pedagogical example.

In chapter four, our response to this situation is discussed. If we continue to hold outmoded interpretations, Kuitert feels that we risk the danger of a double standard of truth. The last thing we should do is attempt to harmonize, for the "best attempts in the world will not bring the first chapters of Genesis into harmony with the current scientific understanding of the history of the world." (K, 46) Such a bad attitude on our part will also challenge the freedom of the Word of God and bind it to men and their influence.

We must never demand more respect for an *interpretation* that comes from the past than a Christian is allowed to give to the work of mere men (K, 48).

But how may we avoid the view that Scripture never speaks to us if we refuse to equate human interpretations with the Bible? First, says Kuitert, we must subject ourselves to the authority of the Bible, not of men. We must "not bind the Bible to *any* particular interpretation" (K, 50). Instead of our certainty and confidence coming from systematic theology or a certain theory about the Bible, it must:

... flow from trust, a trust that the Spirit of God shall lead the people of God into all truth, and that, therefore, the truth is held not by a few theologians or special laymen, but by all the church as the whole people of God (K, 50).

The single intention of Scripture is also vital:

If we separate the words of Scripture from the intention of Scripture, we will always bring readers of the Bible under the Law instead of under Grace (K, 51-52).

In chapter five, Kuitert emphasizes the importance making our purpose in reading match the writer's purpose. Taking the Reformed distinction on commandments: some have historical authority (binding at one time) and others normative authority (binding now), Kuitert applies the first category to the Biblical world-view(s) and physical view of man, claiming that they are not binding because they do not relate to the writers' intention (K, 56).

This raises the question of how we can find the Bible's intention and be sure of it. We could have all parts of the Bible to be authority, but this implies that everything in the Bible is equally important and equally inspired. Besides, "to accept everything reported in the Bible as having actually happened, one must tamper with the text" (K, 60). Kuitert claims that such a view attempts to force a theory on the Bible that does not fit. This undermines the real authority of Scripture, which rests on what it says, rather than what the Bible says resting on the Bible's authority. This wrong view of the Bible produces a wrong view of faith, says Kuitert, namely that belief is a meritorious acceptance of a large number of propositions (the more the better) and that faith is made certain by an indisputable theory about the nature of the Bible. Instead, the proper order of faith is faith in Christ which leads to faith in the Bible (K, 63).

However, the proper way to read the Bible is not to accept some parts as time-bound and others as absolute. There is "no possible way to separate the kernel from the shell" (K, 64). Instead we read it as the saving message of God witnessing to his work in Jesus Christ to give a word of promise for man and his world. We can allow *no other* purpose than John 5:39 ("Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me.") if we are to talk of Biblical authority in the Bible's own way. This prevents us from confusing its outdated ideas with its message that these ideas were intended to convey (K, 64).

The church used this purpose in choosing the New Testament canon; it also annexed the Old Testament as a witness to Christ (K, 66).

In chapter six, Kuitert discusses the problem of the extent of the Bible's purpose. Bultmann and Tillich both concentrate on the purpose outline by Kuitert above, but they "limit God's salvation and acts to what a man can experience, in his own humanity, of God today" (K, ). They have not shown the method to be wrong, in spite of their failure, according to Kuitert. We must realize that no interpretation is guaranteed to be the right one, but we are responsible for our interpretation and have the promise of the Holy Spirit's guidance (K, 78).

In chapter seven, Kuitert says that Christian certainty is certainty about the Bible's message. It is not obtained by arguments, but is created by faith (K, 82). Nevertheless, it is true that for certain things, faith would be empty if they had not occurred. But "the Bible itself, in many places, tells us it is not enough simply to say such and such happened because the Bible says so" (K, 82). The fact that the Bible reports certain events does not guarantee they occurred:

We do not insist that the resurrection of Jesus really happened because the Bible says it did; we do not believe it happened because the Bible tells us *only* about things that really happened. Rather the resurrection is the historical turning point in human life and therefore is the center of the Bible, the authentic motive for the writing of the Bible, and the basis of our faith in the Bible (K, 82-83).

Thus the occurrence of the resurrection is crucial to Christianity, but it is not endangered by investigation:

Historical research did not bring us to faith; only the reading and preaching of the Scriptures did that. Therefore, historical research can never take away our faith, even though it does create difficult problems for us (K, 83).

As regards the interpretation of Scripture, says Kuitert, we understand that the Bible interprets itself in the sense that the Holy Spirit uses the Bible as an instrument. It should not be understood as a static book, as Orthodox Protestantism did. If the Bible is separated from the Spirit, the real Bible disappears. We cannot master the Bible, because it shakes itself loose from all human attempts to control it. Yet the Bible gives us its own purpose as we read it. As poor as the church's hermeneutics have been, they have never completely hidden the Bible's purpose:

Looked at in its broad lines, the Bible remains clear ... But the more we ask about minor particulars, the more likely we are to discover differences (K, 87).

This purpose is made clear by the bible, but it is not made clear automatically; careful human study is necessary. This work of interpretation is not to be done individually, however:

... the understanding of the Bible teaches the entire church and is, therefore safe only within the entire church. This has an obvious ecumenical significance. We cannot work as isolated church groups. When we carry on all by ourselves, the truth gradually becomes "our truth" (K, 90-91).

The leading of the Spirit is only promised to the church as a whole.

In chapter eight, Kuitert discusses the role of science in Biblical interpretation. Too many Christians fear science because of its appearance at the turn of the century, but this fear is no longer justified:

We ought to shed our distrust of the sciences partly because science has learned to control the tools through which it attains its results (K, 95).

The "tools" spoken of here are not primarily scientific instruments, but rather attitudes, methods and argumentation. It regard to attitudes, Kuitert says:

Apart from certain streams within Marxist scientific enterprises, such pretentious declarations of atheism are no longer given a hearing. A scientific person is more likely to admit in all humility that while his instruments are equipped to measure ordinary things, something so unique as the existence of God or the resurrection of Jesus falls outside the competence of his instruments (K, 96).

Kuitert suggests that this fear of science is often due to an overestimate of what it can do. Actually,

Science is nothing other than we ourselves at work with refined instruments in the hope that with their help we can find out more about reality than the naked eye can see (K, 98).

At the same time we must not underestimate science. It forms an important part of our culture which previously did not exist.

Everyone uses science to interpret Scripture in some places (e.g., to detect a fable in Judges 9:8-15). While man's understanding is darkened by sin, it is no more so than the rest of him, including all his sensory faculties:

To refuse to make use of scientific facts in our interpretations of the Bible because of the method by which they are obtained makes no more sense

and is no more responsible than to refuse to use our eyes to see things we would rather not see (K, 99).

Since science is from God as creator and preserver of the world, we must use the facts of science in interpreting the Bible.

It takes some time before scientific data really deserve the status of fact. But when they have achieved that status, there is only one responsible thing to do with them and that is to make use of them and to take account of them (K, 101).

According to Kuitert, these facts show that the first chapters of Genesis are not literal or historical:

Whatever these chapters of the Bible intend to tell us (and we said something about that in previous chapters), they do not intend to teach us that the world is about six thousand years old, and that in this young and complete world an original, human couple lived alone in the garden of Eden (K, 101).

How then do we decide which Bible stories really happened?

*We* must decide. The Bible is of such a nature that it demands the service of men – of men who must consider and judge, make decisions, dare to make decisions, about what the Bible intends and what it does not intend. This applies to the questions of how we can decide whether a given story in the Bible is the story of something that actually happened or not (K, 102).

If we ask whether we are not throwing out parts of the Bible and undermining its authority and trustworthiness, Kuitert answers that trustworthiness is related to the intention of the Bible. The real question is whether the Bible is trustworthy as God's message of salvation:

While there are things whose historical character the Bible writers do not lay upon us, there are also things whose historical character is emphasized as the *sine qua non* of the faith. There is one story in the Bible, the story of Jesus' cross and resurrection, whose historical character forms the very heart of the Christian confession. The story is about an event so unique that our world has known nothing like it before and has known nothing like it since. How could we ever obtain instruments to register this event scientifically? (K, 104).

In his concluding chapter, Kuitert stresses the importance of what God is saying to us today. We cannot use atomic weapons even in extreme emergency. Racism is wrong. Divisions in the church are wrong. Though we should be modest in claims in this area,

we must put ourselves under the rule of Scripture. We cannot allow contradictory opinions in these areas of interpretation to go on much longer if Christians are to be the "salt of the world." To be "fruitfully engaged" with the Bible, we must be concerned with what it is saying to us today. We must renew emphasis on the social aspect rather than just the individual aspect of Christianity.

### Kuitert's Propositions

The following are a few propositions extracted from *Do You Understand What You Read?* Which are important to his work and to the questions of the historical reliability of the Bible and the relationship between faith and history. It is on the basis of these propositions that I shall discuss Kuitert's book:

1. We should not want God to do things different than he does.
2. God's revelation consists of his words and deeds.
3. Scripture has one purpose, to give God's message of salvation.
4. An interpretation is never better than the work of men.
5. The interpretation of the Bible is only safe within the entire church.
6. We must decide whether an event described in the Bible really happened or not.
7. The cosmology, cosmogony and origin of man given in the Bible are not normative, but reflections of ancient world views.
8. Historical research did not bring faith; therefore it cannot take it away.
9. The historicity of Adam is not relevant to our faith.
10. The historicity of the resurrection is necessary to our faith.
11. How could we ever obtain instruments to register the resurrection scientifically?

### Analysis

1. *We should not want God to do things different than he does.* Proposition one is an excellent one, which all Christians would do well to heed. We need to realize God's sovereignty and goodness, and let him run the universe while we seek to do what he has commanded us. As Kuitert applies the proposition, however, we must be careful to ask, "Is Kuitert right about how God *has* done things?"

2. *God's revelation consists of his words and deeds.* Proposition two is likewise a good one and shows that Kuitert's position is closer to the orthodox view of revelation than is that of G. Ernest Wright, for example, who restricts God's revelation to his actions only.

3. *Scripture has one purpose, to give God's message of salvation.* Proposition three sounds good at first, until one sees that Kuitert is not merely saying that this is the most important purpose of Scripture, but *the* purpose, virtually to the exclusion of all others. To this we must replay, "How do we know that John 5:39 gives the purpose of Scripture to the exclusion of such an important one as indicated in Romans 9:22-23:

What if God, willing to show his wrath, and to make his power known, encured with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction; and that he might make know the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had before prepared unto glory ...?

This proposition tends to limit the doctrinal content of Scripture to a small compass.

4. *An interpretation is never better than the work of men.* Proposition four sounds humble, but in fact it is skeptical. An interpretation is better than the work of men when it matches the intention of God, the ultimate author of Scripture, just as one scientific theory is better than another when it better fits the universe as it is. Reality must never be swallowed up by epistemology, certainly not among those who believe in a perspicuous revelation by the God who actually exists. Like the previous proposition, this one also tends to decrease the volume of Biblical revelation.

5. *The interpretation of the Bible is only safe within the entire church.* Proposition five has some merit, but two crucial terms are vague. What is meant by "safe" and what by "church"? Kuitert's remark about the "ecumenical significance" of this principle (K, 90-91, page 6, above) suggests that the interpretation of the Bible is safe in a group including men who are unsaved and openly heretical by Biblical standards. If Kuitert is thinking of agreement on a "lowest common denominator" theory in this statement, the limiting nature of his hermeneutics becomes even stronger.

6. *We must decide whether an event described in the Bible really happened or not.* Proposition six makes the interpreter the judge of the revelation. But then it is no longer revelation, but either a pile of colored stones from which one makes his own mosaic (Bultmann and Tillich) or a television picture which can be defocused to the degree of fuzziness desired without changing the main outlines (Kuitert). But even this latter approach can be disastrous, if one is to believe Paul's letter to the Galatians, for the nature of salvation must in some points be drawn quite sharply.

7. *The cosmology, cosmogony and origin of man given in the Bible are not normative, but reflections of ancient world views.* In my opinion, proposition seven muddles the whole question of Biblical historicity. When one speaks of normative and non-normative commands, the adjective refers to obedience, not to believing the commands were actually giving. It is dangerous to build doctrines on analogies of this sort, rather than specific Biblical statements. A thorough discussion of what the Bible actually *teaches* about cosmology, cosmogony and the origin of man goes far beyond the scope of this paper. But I would strongly disagree that these teachings are merely ancient world views adopted into the Bible.

8. *Historical research did not bring faith; therefore it cannot take it away.* The first half of proposition eight is true for most people, but the second half does not follow. Try using this form of argument to someone who has been mugged in Central Park! *The mugger did not bring your money; therefore he cannot take it away.*

*9. The historicity of Adam is not relevant to our faith.* Proposition nine must be based on some particular view of man's condition and God's salvation about which Kuitert does not elaborate. But anyone who can dispense with the fall of man and his consequent nature (not created that way by God) surely has a view of sin and salvation that is different from that of Scripture.

*10. The historicity of the resurrection is necessary to our faith.* Proposition ten is true and clearly Scriptural. It is essential a paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 15:14.

*11. How could we ever obtain instruments to register the resurrection scientifically?* Proposition eleven (actually a question, but with an implied answer) misses the point of the historical verifiability of the resurrection. It is unnecessary to have some scientific instrument to observe the *process* of resurrection. Verifying the antecedent state of death and the consequent state of life is quite sufficient (and strongly urged as evidence in all sorts of Biblical miracles). Unbelievers have understood this well enough, for they have usually sought to deny the death of Christ (Islam, or the swoon theory) or his resurrected state (stolen body or merely hallucinations). Explanation of causation is not necessary to establish the occurrence of an historical event.

### **Montgomery, *Where Is History Going?***

The second book I wish to consider was written by John Warwick Montgomery, a professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and it appeared in 1969. Montgomery is brilliant and yet lucid in his style. He writes from the position of one whose faith did come through an examination of the evidence for Christianity and who feels it could be taken away by historical research, were not Christianity true.

### **Outline**

Again we can get a reasonable idea of the scope of Montgomery's book by looking at the chapter titles:

1. Where is History Going?
2. Jesus Christ and History (1)
3. Jesus Christ and History (2)
4. The Christian Church in McNeill's *Rise of the West*
5. Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology of History
6. Tillich's Philosophy of History
7. Gordon Clark's Historical Philosophy
8. Toward a Christian Philosophy of History

### **Summary**

Chapter one is a critique of recent attempts to give an overall picture of and meaning for history. Chapters two and three present an excellent historical apologetic for the resurrection and deity of Christ, which is superior to Morison's *Who Moved the Stone?* as

it does not pit the Gospels against one another or play down the miraculous. Chapter four presents the historical importance of Christianity in Western civilization by means of a critique of McNeill's recent work. We will discuss chapters five and seven below, and chapter six is of the same sort. Chapter eight gives Montgomery's conclusions and a prescription for the preparation of a general history which would give the truth of Biblical revelation its proper place. The appendices are valuable also. I strongly commend Montgomery's book as an excellent contribution to historiography and the philosophy of history, as well as to Christian apologetics.

In chapter five, Karl Barth's views on history are discussed. As regards total (or secular) history, Barth sees only a monotony of human pride (M, 102). This seems to be in strong reaction to the optimistic worldview of the old liberalism in which Barth was trained (M, 103-04), but it neglects the biblical teaching of God's providential direction of history for his purposes and his establishment of certain human institutions such as the family and the state (M, 105). Barth's view of secular history is thus parallel to his doctrine of natural revelation; in both cases he would deny that we have an objective Divine imprint which is only made apparent by revelation (M, 104-05).

Barth does see significance in salvation history or *Heilsgeschichte*, but this type of history is somehow disjoint from ordinary events:

The entrance of sin into the world through Adam is in no strict sense an historical or psychological happening ... The sin which entered the world through Adam is, like the righteousness manifested to the world in Christ, timeless and transcendental (M, 106).

To this it might be objected that Barth has attacked Bultmann for denying the facticity of the resurrection, but Barth's opposition to Bultmann is subjective and thus opposed to the idea of the objectivity of the gospel which so characterized the Reformation (M, 106-07). This subjectivity of Barth is further seen in his emphasis on the "hiddenness" of revelation (M, 107, 109-10). Montgomery feels this emphasis is rooted in Barth's fear of an intellectual attack by "post-Christian" forces (M, 110):

Barth's fear of being unable to defend the Christian revelation historically has thus led him to the point where, ostrich-like, he ignores the existence of unbelief and denies the ontological existence of evil; he merely proclaims a "transhistorical" gospel to those who – even though they deny it – are "believers" already (M, 111).

By this method, says Montgomery, Barth has succeeded in removing Christianity from criticism and from the need of apologetics at the cost of abandoning the incarnation, the Biblical doctrine of sin and any meaningful relation of the gospel to general human history. As a result, Barth's Christianity is a timeless, unsupportable religion like Buddhism, Hinduism and their theosophical counterparts in the West (M, 111).

Barth's attitude toward history has now begun to make substantial inroads into evangelical circles. Commenting on this, Montgomery says:

I think Ramm totally in error when he says that "the reality of historical revelation does not put the Christian in a superior position to write the philosophy of history." The Christian historian is in fact the *only* person who *can* write the philosophy of history, because only he has a revelational perspective which is not conditioned by his own finite stance in history (M, 113).

Montgomery indicates four points at which secular historiography has been stymied: (1) it is unable to reach a satisfactory and defensible view of human nature; (2) it cannot determine levels of significance among historical events for lack of absolute standards; (3) it does not know the origin or goal of history, so it cannot give accurate patterns of total history; (4) without regeneration there is no way to change the egocentric personality of the historian so that he can "put himself back in the past" (M, 113).

Montgomery also quotes from an article by Ladd in *Dialgo* and says that he makes the same mistake as Barth. That is, both make a "meta-historical category" for the resurrection "to preserve it theological truth from historical criticism." In stead of doing this, one should make a distinction between historicism (positivism applied to history) and a truly empirical historical method which does not exclude phenomena because they are unique or cannot be linked causally (M, 115).

Since this chapter was previously printed in the *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* (May, 1963), Montgomery's remarks have provoked a reply from Ladd which appeared later that year in the same journal. The main thrust of Ladd's response "Faith and History" is that Montgomery is misusing the concept of *Historie* (L, 86). Ladd says:

*Historie* by definition is secular, unbelieving history ... *Historie* is only that dimension of the past which conforms to the presuppositions of and can be known by the techniques of modern secular historiography (L, 86-87).

Thus, according to Ladd, there is an unbelieving methodology to which faith must be added:

... Faith provides a means of access to an area of objective reality which scientific historical criticism cannot apprehend. Faith does not create its own object; faith is reposed in the objective Biblical Christ who meets us in the Gospels (L, 87).

Ladd then compares and contrasts Barth's and Bultmann's definitions of *Geschichte* (which they both contrast to *Historie*). He then accepts Barth's definition as his own (L, 90-91). This view is characterized as follows:

It is sheer superstition to suppose that only things which are open to "historical" (*historische*) verification can have happened in time. There may have been events which far more certainly have actually happened in time than the kind of things the scientific historian can prove (L, 88).

How Barth's position here is consistent with that quoted above on page 11 (M, 106) is not clear, but let us give him that benefit few liberals are willing to give the Bible. Montgomery's position appears to be that Barth, Ladd and others should not be making the distinction which they do, and therefore he uses *Historie* in his own sense. In chapter seven of *Where Is History Going?*, referring to Gordon Clark, Montgomery says:

One misses an analysis of the exceedingly unfortunate consequences attendant on Barth's use of Martin Kähler's distinction between ordinary, verifiable historical events (*Historie*) and the "significant" and "historic" – but unverifiable – events of biblical revelation (*Heilsgeschichte*) (M, 151).

Thus Montgomery is arguing against what he feels is a false definition of historical method, such as the following one given by Bultmann:

The historical method includes the presupposition that history is a unity in the sense of a closed continuum of effects in which individual events are connected by a succession of cause and effect ... This closedness means that the continuum of historical happenings cannot be rent by the interference of supernatural, transcendent powers and that therefore there is no "miracle" in this sense of the word (L, 90).

On the contrary, Montgomery says:

Our responsibility is to make sure that in the use of historical method, scientistic historicistic presuppositions ... are not smuggled into the picture disguised as objective historical method and allowed to determine the results of the investigation (M, 116).

In chapter seven of his book, Montgomery deals with Gordon Clark's philosophy of history. At the kindness of Professor Clark, Montgomery had access to a work still in preparation in 1968, so his discussion is quite up-to-date. Clark has treated three important areas related to history: the nature of time, God and determinism, and epistemology. It is the last of these, where Montgomery considers Clark's view least adequate (M, 155), that we wish to consider here.

Gordon Clark is a presuppositionalist. He rejects the possibility of an objective treatment of data either in science or in history (M, 154). The historical facts are so unable to convey meaning by themselves that the historian cannot show why he concentrates on some facts and neglects others (M, 163). Montgomery objects to this:

Why give the impression that no one, scientist or historian, Bultmannian or non-Bultmannian, can arrive at objective truth through direct investigation of data? For Prof. Clark, one *must* accept this conclusion, troublesome though it may be in dealing with a Bultmann, for only the prior acceptance of the "axiom of revelation" will yield factual truth in any sphere of knowledge (M, 155).

As a result, Clark favors the relativists in the philosophy of history as more convincing than the objectivists. He is unwilling to accept the results of historical research as objective true unless it can produce "absolute," "unalterable" results, like those in deductive logic (M, 167-68). Montgomery argues that there are two epistemological alternatives here: we may have formal perfection (deductive certainty) with no empirical content to our knowledge, *or* we made have empirical objectivity if we do not make impossible demands on the method. Against Clark, Montgomery feels we must take the latter alternative because Christianity is based on revelation *in* history (M, 168-69).

The conviction that historical facts do carry their interpretations (i.e., that the facts in themselves provide adequate criteria for choosing among variant interpretations of them) is essential both to Christian and to general historiography (M, 164).

Otherwise, one cannot show the inherent significance of Gospel history and is led to a subjectivism where the ultimate basis for finding meaning in history is personal *choice* rather than *facts* (M, 164-65).

Clark's view of doing history and science by imposing one's metaphysical system on the data is wrong, according to Montgomery, which is not to say it is not commonly done. But crucial experiments and facts do distinguish between systems (M, 169).

Furthermore Montgomery feels that Clark misunderstands the causation issue. Because it is impossible to state a universal law of causation, Clark feels that objectivity is also unattainable. But this is equivalent to requiring deductive proof. Causation is an empirical construct used to understand facts. But although we do not understand light, for example, we do accept its objective existence (M, 169-70).

According to Montgomery, the position and arguments of the historical relativists have been demolished by analytical philosophers of history. Such men as J. W. N. Watkins have pointed out that all of the problems of bias present in historical work are also present in scientific research. The objective nature of a theory does not depend on the background, temperament and presuppositions of its proponents, but on the *criticizability* of the theory itself (M, 171). Watkins' remarks are not directed so much at Clark, who puts *both* history and science away as subjective, but it does suggest that criticism of theory by use of evidence provides an objectivizing factor.

Montgomery seeks to show that Clark's view barely avoids solipsism, and this only by his doctrine of the "internal witness of the Spirit," so that his position is finally that of

fideism (M, 178). Clark's "axiom of revelation," mentioned above, says that true objectivity is absent from both science and history and that only the Bible is undistorted. But this axiom facts the dilemma that the Bible is a sensory and historical object. Therefore it would be distorted by (subjective) science and history which we must use to study it. Therefore *nothing* is undistorted (M, 173-75).

Nash's attempt to avoid this problem by making the axiom of revelation an inductive hypothesis is certainly not acceptable to Clark in view of his epistemology. Nor is internal consistency a sufficient condition for truth. The most dangerous errors are those which are internally consistent, but actually false. Besides no man on earth knows enough to be able to show Christianity is consistent at all points (M, 176-77).

It is encouraging to note that Montgomery is not satisfied with tearing down other views of history, but he goes on to build what he feels is the proper approach. The reason for the failure of secular historians is not

in the inability of historical facts to speak clearly apart from philosophical commitments. The difficulty is rather, as I have noted elsewhere, that "such a welter of historical data exists that we do not know how to relate all the facts to each other. Our lifetime is too short and our perspective is too limited" (M, 165-66).

To construct a Christian philosophy of history, Montgomery admits the necessity of *a priori*. But these principles should be methodological rather than substantive ("how to do research" rather than "what we must find"). The *a priori* of the empirical method (not positivism) are unavoidably necessary to distinguish synthetic truth from error (M, 178-79).

From these principles, Montgomery argues to the Christian claims as follows:

1. The Gospels are trustworthy historical documents on the basis of accepted textual and historical analysis.
2. In the Gospels, Jesus claims to be God, and rests his claim on his predicted resurrection.
3. The resurrection is described in detail in all the Gospels, evidencing his deity.
4. The resurrection cannot be discounted *a priori*; to rule out the miraculous is to rule out proper historical investigation.
5. If Christ is God, he is right on the authority of the Old Testament and New Testament, on the purpose of his death and on the nature of man and history.
6. All Biblical assertions bearing on the philosophy of history are thus revealed truth; all human attempts at historical interpretation may be judged in relation to this revelation M, 179).

George Mavrodes has argued against statements such as the last above, claiming that Bible knowledge is no higher than any other kind, all being known by the same means.

But Montgomery answers that the value of Biblical truth is not determined by the epistemological route by which it is obtained (M, 180-81). It is just this fact that makes the content of Clark's theology so good when his epistemology is so bad, and which allows even simple people to be saved.

### **Montgomery's Propositions**

1. *A prioris* are necessary, but they should involve method rather than content.  
The *a prioris* of the empirical method are unavoidably necessary to distinguish synthetic truth from error.
2. A truly empirical historical method does not exclude phenomena because they are unique or cannot be causally linked to other phenomena.
3. In both science and history, crucial experiments or facts do distinguish between systems.
4. Historical facts carry their interpretations; that is, the facts in themselves provide adequate criteria for choosing among variant interpretations of them.
5. Acceptance of #4 is essential to Christian and general historiography if subjectivism is to be avoided.
6. The failure of secular historians to construct a philosophy of history is due to the mass of data and their limited perspective.
7. The Bible provides the perspective necessary to write a universal history.
8. All Biblical assertions bearing on history and science are revealed truth; all human attempts at historical or scientific interpretation may be judged in relation to this revelation.
9. The value of truth is not determined by the epistemological route by which it is reached.

### **Analysis**

1. *A prioris are necessary, but they should involve method rather than content. The a prioris of the empirical method are unavoidably necessary to distinguish synthetic truth from error.* Proposition one may sound heretical to some presuppositionalists, but I believe one of the Bible's charges against mankind is *distorting* the evidence to fit certain presuppositions (Romans 1:18, 21, 23, 35, 38). Even Christians need to check their views continually against Biblical statements and against historical and scientific evidence.

2. *A truly empirical historical method does not exclude phenomena because they are unique or cannot be causally linked to other phenomena.* Proposition two is very important in defining the empirical method. The statement that miracles do not (or cannot) occur is a content-type of *a priori* which characterizes positivism.

3. *In both science and history, crucial experiments or facts do distinguish between systems.* Proposition three is certainly true in the area of less basic presuppositions. The Biblical statements regarding the objectivity of natural revelation and the guilt of the

Jews in rejecting their Messiah indicate that this is true for the most basic presuppositions also.

*4. Historical facts carry their interpretations; that is, the facts in themselves provide adequate criteria for choosing among variant interpretations of them.* Proposition four is just an application of these to historical research.

*5. Acceptance of #4 is essential to Christian and general historiography if subjectivism is to be avoided.* Proposition five follows from the foregoing propositions.

*6. The failure of secular historians to construct a philosophy of history is due to the mass of data and their limited perspective.* Proposition six is based on the foregoing also. The effect of sin is to influence methodology and to influence the selection of data.

*7. The Bible provides the perspective necessary to write a universal history.* Proposition seven is based on Montgomery's analysis of the reasons for the failure of secular historians. It seems reasonable to me, but is beyond my competence.

*8. All Biblical assertions bearing on history and science are revealed truth; all human attempts at historical or scientific interpretation may be judged in relation to this revelation.* Proposition eight is broadened from a specific statement by Montgomery, but it should be acceptable to him in view of other remarks he has made. This proposition is admittedly widely disputed in evangelical circles today, but the contrary view really reduces to giving alleged errors priority over the specific Biblical teaching.

*9. The value of truth is not determined by the epistemological route by which it is reached.* Proposition nine follows from what may be the only content *a priori* of the empirical method: there actually exists something to investigate.

## Conclusions

To summarize my discussions of Kuitert and Montgomery, let me say that I feel only propositions 1, 2 and 10 of Kuitert are acceptable without considerable qualification. All of Montgomery's propositions seem valid to me.

In addition, let me add the following propositions of my own:

1. Give God the benefit of the doubt. (We might even try this for men occasionally, as long as it does not put us in conflict with God.)
2. An interpretation, whether in Biblical studies, history or science, may correspond to reality and therefore be better than the work of men.
3. When scientific interpretations reach the status of scientific facts, they should be used in Biblical interpretations. When Biblical interpretations reach the status of Biblical facts, they should be used in scientific interpretations. The same can be said for historical and Biblical studies.

4. Biblical *interpreters* are time-bound. Therefore it is possible that an interpretation may become obsolete. It is poor methodology to assume any given interpretation may be obsolete without specific evidence.
5. The Bible states several purposes for its being written. It is arbitrary to exclude any of these in attempting to understand the Bible.
6. The miraculous events of the Old and New Testaments should be understood as historical in the sense of producing *natural* effects in space-time which are detectable by historical research.
7. The historicity of Adam is relevant to the origin of sin in the human race, which is the reason that God's work of salvation is necessary for humans.