

THEOLOGIAN AND THINKER

By JAROSLAV PELIKAN

I WENT to Africa in obedience to Jesus," Albert Schweitzer wrote to a friend in 1931. Yet Schweitzer will be remembered in the history of Christian theology as the scholar who rejected the effort to modernize Jesus and who put the teachings of Jesus back into the framework of the thoroughgoing eschatology of the first century. During the more than sixty years since Schweitzer's first publications on the life of Jesus, students of the New Testament have come to agree with him that the Sermon on the Mount is not intended to serve as a summary of the timeless truths of human experience or of common sense about the good life (as, for example, the Analects of Confucius seem to be), but as an interim ethic for a waiting community of his faithful disciples. The disciples expected Jesus the Messiah to return soon, bringing with him the kingdom of God. That is what Jesus expected, too. The expectation was mistaken, and therefore the interim ethic of the messianic community is irrelevant.

With this historical thesis Schweitzer

declared his independence of the Christian dogma of the God-man Christ Jesus, and also severed the nerve of nineteen centuries of Christian morality. The emancipated theology of modern Protestantism had repudiated the dogma before Schweitzer, of course, but it had done so in the name of "the historical Jesus" and of his message of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. Schweitzer's professor, Adolf von Harnack of Berlin, delivered a series of public lectures in the winter semester of the academic year 1899-1900 entitled "What Is Christianity?" (*Das Wesen des Christentums*). Harnack's summary of the essence of Christianity was: "The Gospel, as Jesus proclaimed it, has to do with the Father only and not with the Son." Therefore the Gospel of Jesus is a universal message whose valid core can be extracted from the language and imagery of the first century as the kernel is extracted from a nut.

Although Schweitzer left Berlin a few months before Harnack's lectures, his research into the Gospels had already begun to lead him toward radically different conclusions. Even while Harnack was probing for the irreducible mini-

mum or *Wesen* of Christianity, Schweitzer was investigating the significance of the Last Supper in the career of Jesus. Rejecting both the orthodox Catholic doctrine of "sacramental repetition" and the liberal Protestant idea of "symbolic representation," he put the Last Supper into the context of the expectation Jesus had of returning as the triumphant Messiah. This view of the Last Supper was developed in Schweitzer's monograph of 1901 on *The Problem of the Last Supper* and in an accompanying volume entitled *The Secret of the Messiahship and the Suffering: A Sketch of the Life of Jesus*. (Both these books, as well as the 600-page *Kant* of 1899, came out long before the author's thirtieth birthday.) A third study, or pair of studies, in which Schweitzer intended to trace the evolution of the Lord's Supper and of baptism in early Christianity, has never been published.

Instead of proceeding to that third study, Schweitzer turned to the work on which his standing as a New Testament scholar chiefly rests, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, which appeared in 1906. The outline of *The Quest* is deceptively simple: a series of chapters dealing with the principal attempts at the construction of a biography of Jesus during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Each biography is analyzed and criticized both as an interpretation of the biblical data and as a theological construction. Thus Ernest Renan "professes to depict the Christ of the Fourth Gospel, though he does not believe in

At the Ogoué River near his hospital—The challenge was absolute.

—SR photo by N.C.



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the authenticity or the miracles of that Gospel. . . . The historian finds it hard to forgive him . . . for offering in place of a solution the highly colored phrases of the novelist." And so it goes on, from one *Life of Jesus* to the next. The enemies of Jesus often emerge as more honest historians than his professed disciples and defenders. Running through all of Schweitzer's "History of Research into the Life of Jesus" (as he called it in German) is his conviction that neither the enemies of Christianity nor the believers have been able to come to terms with the consistently futuristic character of the eschatology of Jesus: he expected the consummation of world history in his own era, and shared the naïvely literalistic picture of this consummation that was characteristic of late Jewish apocalypticism. The suffering and death of Jesus are the result not of a plot by his enemies nor of a cosmic plan of God for the redemption of the human race, but of his resolution to suffer for others to bring about the coming of the kingdom of God.

The impact of Schweitzer's *Quest* was almost immediate both on the Continent and in Great Britain; an English translation appeared in 1910. Others before him had contended for the centrality of eschatology in the teachings of Jesus, notably Johannes Weiss about a decade earlier. But it fell to Schweitzer to set the case for this centrality into opposition with the principal trends of modern biblical interpretation, and to make the case stick. From his work some have drawn the conclusion that it is impossible to write a biography of Jesus, others that the search for an "essence of Christianity" within and behind the eschatological message of Jesus should not be abandoned but made more sophisticated, often with the help of some kind of existentialism. But all biblical scholars, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, are in Schweitzer's debt. His efforts to follow the same method in a study of *Paul and His Interpreters* (1911) and of *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (1930) are, by common consent, less convincing; and his monograph of 1913 on *The Psychiatric Study of Jesus* is largely a further development of his earlier thesis. But the major achievement stands: "Jesus's purpose is to set in motion the eschatological development of history, to let loose the final woes, the confusion and strife, from which shall issue the Parousia [the Second Coming], and so to introduce the supra-mundane phase of the eschatological drama."

Nevertheless, "I went to Africa in obedience to Jesus"! How could the catastrophic miscalculation of a Palestinian rabbi in the first century motivate so dramatic an about-face in the twentieth? With the psychological dimensions

On Civilization: Through ethical acceptance of the world and of life, we reach a power of reflection which enables us to distinguish between what is essential in civilization and what is not. The stupid arrogance of thinking ourselves civilized loses its power over us. We venture to face the truth that with so much progress in knowledge and power true civilization has become not easier but harder. . . . We know that we all have to struggle with circumstances to preserve our humanity, and that we must be anxiously concerned to turn once more toward hope of victory. . . .

—From "*Out of My Life and Thought*" (1933).

of this question I will not presume to deal; they belong to the mystery of one of the most simple and yet complex persons of our time. But the question also has a theological dimension. How can so Christian and even orthodox a conclusion as Schweitzer's life be drawn from so radical and even heretical a premise as Schweitzer's theology? Schweitzer's answer to this anomaly helps one to understand more than his own career. To put it a little epigrammatically, the message of Jesus is relevant because it is so irrelevant. If the Gospel of divine forgiveness and human love had been presented as a set of copybook maxims, it would address us today with as much (and as little) urgency as the Book of Proverbs, with which no one would dispute but to which it is difficult to respond in existential commitment. But because the accompaniment of the message of Jesus is the apocalyptic thunder of the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven, it addresses us with an inescapable imperative and demands our decision. Just as the account of creation in Genesis has been able to communicate the majesty of God the Creator within every cosmology from Ptolemy to Einstein precisely because it is not a blow-by-blow account of the origin of the cosmos but a dramatic dialogue transcending all world views, so the apocalyptic setting of the Sermon on the Mount and of the call to discipleship, "Follow me!" grounds the summons of Jesus in the absolute character of God and of his demands upon us. We may answer No to the summons, but answer we must.

The Nobel Prize address of November 4, 1954, and later statements show that Schweitzer, like the rest of us, began to find that the apocalyptic language of the Bible is entirely too relevant today. As he wrote in 1955, "Through the immeasurably destructive power which has been placed in man's hands by the discoveries of science, and the utter ruin

which can be caused thereby, mankind is forced to the conclusion that nothing remains but to long for the realization, somehow or other, of the kingdom of God on earth." But Dr. Schweitzer would not relapse into a passive or a merely futuristic ethic even in the face of the modern apocalypse, for that is not what "the spirit of Jesus" meant to him. The spirit of Jesus, shed abroad in the human heart, would bring about the true kingdom of God among men. The call to heed the spirit of Jesus and to let it rule was the eternal challenge in the Gospel, and that challenge was absolute. It did not become less insistent when the apocalyptic of the first century lost its validity, or more insistent when the twentieth century reverted to apocalyptic. In obedience to that absolute call of service lay the meaning and promise of life for Albert Schweitzer; in it lay also the disclosure of the mystery of Jesus:

"He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, he came to those men who knew him not. He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow thou me!' and sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey him, whether they be wise or simple, he will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in his fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who he is."



—Billedsentralen (Pix).
Schweitzer and his wife
at Nobel Prize ceremony.

IN MUSIC, A NEW APPROACH



—Black Star.

"The first buildings at this hospital were paid for by Johann Sebastian Bach."

By ROSALYN TURECK

THE DEATH of Albert Schweitzer has brought an era to an end. Schweitzer was one of the first heralds of the modern renaissance of Bach that began at the inception of the twentieth century. The quality of his particular insight into Bach's music was revelatory. Emerging from his own strength of mind and depth of being, revelation was to him a recurring phenomenon. The grief for the loss of such a man in our present culture is matched only by the sadness of recognizing that his death has taken from the world a rare figure where the music of Bach was concerned. He believed that Bach's music could be played well only if one felt it as always sublime. Today musicians are more musicologically and technically minded. How many performers would be free and unafraid to experience and perform Bach with Schweitzer's aim? The question answers itself.

I met Albert Schweitzer for the first time in London in 1955. At the end of our meeting he gave me a photograph of himself seated at the organ. I learned later that this was one of his favorite photographs and had been taken forty

years earlier. By that time Schweitzer had already written his famous two-volume work on Bach, entitled in the first French edition, published in 1905, *Jean-Sebastian Bach, le Musicien-Poète*.

Brahms once said that the two greatest events of the nineteenth century were the formation of the German Republic and the creation of the Bach-Gesellschaft edition. I extend the historical parallel by saying the two greatest events in the modern Bach renaissance at the turn of the twentieth century were the completion of the Bach-Gesellschaft edition (fifty years in the making) and the publication of Schweitzer's Bach volumes. The importance of this work is due not so much to Schweitzer's research, considerable though this was, as to his insight into the relationship between Bach's music and his text. Spitta far surpassed Schweitzer in research, but as a result of this one perception Schweitzer gave scholarship a fresh approach. At the same time the implications of this perception pointed out a radically different musical situation. This was the necessity for acknowledging a broader involvement of the composer than had been generally supposed. The modern performer also became implicated in this discovery.

The recognition of the musical relationship to the word was bound to come, but Schweitzer was the first to make the definitive statement and to elaborate it in full. Naturally, his work created a great stir in the music world, for definitive statements often appear too soon. Inevitably a large faction in the field is not ready for it. In Schweitzer's case, a great number of musicians and scholars refused to believe that Bach was so involved with the spirit of the word in linking his music to the pictorial situation. The main objections to Schweitzer's premise arose from his shattering of established notions about Bach's "objectivity" and remote intellectuality.

Charles Marie Widor relates in his preface to the German edition of 1908 how Schweitzer enlightened him in an area of style that heretofore had confused him. And Ernest Newman, the eminent translator of the English edition published in 1911, said in his preface, "Its convincing demonstration of the pictorial bent of Bach's mind must necessarily lead to a reconsideration, not only of the older view of Bach as a mainly 'abstract musician,' but of the esthetics of music in general."

The general view of Bach in the nineteenth century had suffered from three diverse schools of thought: one being Bach as finger exercise, another regarding his music as dry intellectualism, and the third expanding irrepressibly—and in many cases irresponsibly—into a copy of the full-blown idiom of the late nineteenth-century romantic and virtuoso styles.

Schweitzer's own mind reflects the nineteenth century, but his brilliant insight into the deep relationship of word and music takes the best from this period and transcends it. Research through several decades since Schweitzer has revealed the validity of his thesis. In the light of recent research we have found that fashioning the music to the text was the general practice of baroque composers and that Bach was following a way of composing rather than creating it.

Schweitzer brought a brilliant light into the conceptual sphere of Bach and a new view of his style. The substance of his ideas, however, was shackled by a theory that Schweitzer created from them. For example, he regards the musical figures that depict precise pictorial situations or moods in the choral works as being typical patterns and, in addition, applies the same connotation to similar figures in purely instrumental music. Schweitzer's intent was to prove that there are specific formulae for musical figures and that they convey a parallel significance of mood when met in an instrumental work. He says:

Bach has a dual expression for grief.
To depict lamentation of a noble kind,