

## Robert W. Funk and the German Theological Tradition

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Bob Funk did his graduate work at Vanderbilt University, completing it in 1953 with his Ph. D. thesis, *The Syntax of the Greek Article: Its Importance for Critical Pauline Problems*. His dissertation supervisor, Kendrick Grobel (1908–65), introduced the young student—whose rejection of simplistic Christian creeds led him to scholarship<sup>1</sup>—to the world of biblical criticism, which at the time was largely shaped by German scholars. Grobel’s active role in this movement began in 1934 with his dissertation, “Form Criticism and Synoptic Source Analysis,”<sup>2</sup> prepared under the supervision of the famous form critic Martin Dibelius at the University of Heidelberg.<sup>3</sup> Grobel also translated Rudolf Bultmann’s “Theology of the New Testament” (1951, 1955), and in the early fifties organized a U. S. lecture tour by Rudolf Bultmann. The young Bob Funk must have listened attentively when the famous German exegete delivered the Cole Lectures at Vanderbilt Divinity School.

No wonder, then, that he spent the first twenty years of his scholarly career in developing and transmitting the philological, linguistic, historical-critical, and theological skills he acquired from German New Testament scholarship. He actively participated in conferences on New Testament hermeneutics at Drew University and later at Vanderbilt, where in 1966 he was called to succeed his former mentor, Kendrick Grobel. Along with similarly oriented Americans James M. Robinson, Van A. Harvey, and Schubert Ogden, he translated Bultmann’s essays and joined their author’s German students Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs in developing Bultmann’s ideas. This engagement led to Funk’s editorship of “Journal for Theology and Church”—the American counterpart of the German “Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche”—and his contribution to “New Frontiers in Theology”, a forum for discussions between German and American theologians. A major product of this period in his career was the 1966 monograph, *Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God*. Combining linguistic analysis and hermeneutic with exacting historical and exegetical New Testament research, this book marks his bold attempt to discover whether, once taken for granted, the word of God can employ contemporary language for the proclamation of

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<sup>1</sup> See the retrospect in Robert W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millenium*, 1996, pp. 3–6.

<sup>2</sup> Published under the same title, “Formgeschichte und synoptische Quellenanalyse,” in 1937 by Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. The editor of the series *Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments* then was Rudolf Bultmann.

<sup>3</sup> Grobel’s command of ancient languages was impressive. No wonder that he published the first American commentary on one of the newly discovered texts from Nag Hammadi, *Gospel of Truth*, 1956.

the Christian message. The Foreword was written in July 1966 at Tübingen, where shortly before his inauguration as Professor of New Testament at Vanderbilt he was a Senior Guggenheim Fellow.

One may rightly characterize this phase of Bob Funk's thought with words from the jacket of his book: "German theology has played a leading role in the creative theological thinking of modern times. American theology has shown a characteristic openness in assimilating the significant movements in German thought, but the American role has been largely that of receiving conclusions." That was to end soon, and the reason was partly political, partly theological. For one thing, the American partners were not considered when in the early seventies the editorial board of the German *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* changed with the election of several neo-conservative board members. For another, Bultmann's German heirs turned to neo-orthodoxy by emphasizing the role of theology as a handmaid of the Christian church. Remember in the late sixties and early seventies the anti-authoritarian movement was knocking at the church door and calling for radical changes. The overall situation led to another shift in Bob Funk's thought. Reluctantly, he gave up his hope of relating academic theology to the church, for there was "nothing real on the agenda." At Duke University on August 18, 1976, he delivered to the Society of New Testament Scholars a lecture entitled, "American Biblical Scholarship: The Transition from Preoccupation to Occupation." In this address he outlined the need for American biblical scholarship to adopt a new orientation that would stress its independence from the very German theology he had so long attempted to transplant to American soil. Though I have not kept notes of this memorable lecture the following quote from Funk's *Honest to Jesus* 20 years later contains the spirit of that lecture. "Self-esteem (among American biblical scholars) is low, and self-identify is weak. There is an abiding nostalgia for the European tradition where scholarship is honored and honored and honored, beyond reason—where Herr Professor Dr. Dr. is the unsolicited mode of address in the grocery for persons with two doctoral degrees and a lifetime appointment. It is no wonder that at the first chance and with the help of the National Endowment for the Humanities, American scholars head off to Europe to have their academic achievements recognized and their egos refurbished."<sup>4</sup>

Yet quite a few remaining items certify Bob Funk's grounding in the German theological tradition. While it is true that he abandoned abstruse hermeneutical demonstrations of the occurrence of the word of God in the proclamation, his preoccupation with language and his commitment to historical analysis remained. Indeed, he took the latter more seriously than Bultmann, for whom the period of innovating historical analysis ended after his encounter with

Karl Barth in 1919. Hans Conzelmann, my Göttingen New Testament teacher and a student of Bultmann, noted that from the mid twenties on Bultmann did not offer any courses on *Introduction to the New Testament* or *History of Primitive Christianity* but focused exclusively on the theological meaning of the New Testament and the hermeneutical task. By acknowledging his debt to David Friedrich Strauss in the dedication of *The Five Gospels* and by practicing the unrelenting analytical and historical work of nineteenth century German biblical study, Funk was highly successful in transmitting these priceless elements of German theological scholarship – which, alas, many in both Germany and America regard as theologically irrelevant. It is a tragic irony that in 1921 Bultmann had done the same historical analysis in his *History of the Synoptic Tradition* – a book he had planned to dedicate to the memory of David Friedrich Strauss, but for tactical reasons followed the advice of his advisor Wilhelm Heitmüller and refrained from doing so. He never continued his analytical work. Fortunately, that critical, analytic spirit found a brilliant spokesman in Bob Funk, whose unremitting dedication to enlightened religion gave it new life, and whose creation of Westar and the Jesus Seminar assured that the resolute historicism of Strauss and Bultmann would survive and indeed flourish on both sides of the Atlantic.

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<sup>4</sup> Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 56.