
Biblical Theology Revived

By George A. Turner

This issue of *The Asbury Seminarian* features the current interest in Biblical theology. It is now fairly obvious that we have reached the end of an era in Biblical scholarship—an era in which the historical critic was too often scornful of the theologian. It was an era in which scholars often failed to see the forest because of the trees. This attitude was, in itself, a reaction against the “pre-critical” and often dogmatic exegesis of an earlier day. The current trend in Biblical studies seeks to rectify some of the negative results which came from the atomistic methods of the higher critics—methods which often emphasized analysis at the expense of unity. For our day the change of emphasis is a wholesome one. The current emphasis represents a synthesis of the earlier theological approach with the later critical approach and suggests the Hegelian interpretation of history as “thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.”

From the “evangelical” viewpoint (as the term is widely used in American Protestantism) the current emphasis on Biblical theology is welcome. There is, for instance, a recognition of the essential unity of the Scriptures. Increasingly it is being recognized that the historical books of the Old Testament present a consistent interpretation of Hebrew history. The prophets are essentially at one with respect to the Mosaic legislation. The Gospels and Epistles share a common view of the significance of Jesus’ ministry and death. Such themes as church and kingdom unify not only the Testaments but the entire Bible, as Nelson (*The Realm of Redemption*, 1951) and Bright (*The Kingdom of God*, 1953) have shown.

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A major problem today among “liberal” Bible scholars is that of harmonizing an active Christian faith with Biblical criticism. They are sensitive to the charge that Biblical research has too often assumed an attitude of irresponsibility and has even been negative and injurious with respect to the Christian faith. They realize Christian scholarship must provide a positive leadership if Christianity is to make headway against the challenge of materialism in its many forms. “Neo-liberal” and “neo-orthodox” scholars have recently turned their attention to the work of reconstruction (cf. John Knox, *Criticism and Faith*, 1952; Edwin Lewis, *The Biblical Faith and Christian Freedom*, 1952; and B. W. Anderson, *Rediscovering the Bible*, 1951).

A major problem among “evangelical” or conservative scholars concerns the inspiration and authority of the Bible. Usually such discussions center in the questions of inerrancy. Any valid theory of inspiration must grow out of the evidence which the Bible itself yields rather than a theory superimposed upon the Scriptures. Conservative scholarship, which had long languished, is at last flourishing again and some significant contributions can be expected in the near future. A growing dissatisfaction with positions which are satisfying to faith, but not sufficiently concerned with fact, is apparent. A new degree of objectivity in conservative scholarship is discernible. Altogether the situation is favorable for advance in Biblical scholarship both among the neo-liberals and the neo-fundamentalists or essentialists.

Asbury Theological Seminary does not take an official stand on every contemporary theological issue, except as this is contained in the Statement of Faith recently prepared by the administration and trustees. Allowance is made for individual opinion within a common area of shared convictions. Many times, without being aware of it, the school has reacted to an issue in a way characteristic of the Pietist movement. This involves essentially a loyalty to the Scriptures as the sole authority for the Christian, the importance of a vital faith, and latitude in the area of opinion. The ideal is tolerance without indifference, good will without surrender of discernment.

This self-styled “evangelical” viewpoint is distinguishable from an overly-literalistic fundamentalism on the one hand and a subjectivistic neo-orthodoxy on the other. There is in some branches of fundamentalism a tendency to over-simplify critical problems. Many times a crass literalism obscures a sound interpretation. The position

that the Bible needs presentation more than defense seems a needed emphasis. We think that the proof-text method of presenting a position is often dogmatic and lacking in perspective. We recognize that while “all Scripture is inspired of God,” yet the result is not a mechanical word-for-word dictation. Freedom was left for the individual to convey God’s thought in speech reflecting his own personality and the spirit of the age in which it came to utterance. It should be clear to the careful student that inspiration was refracted through human personality and historical situations, thus being accommodated to man’s capacity for reception. Jesus set this forth in his teaching on divorce, in which the original revelation to Adam was modified at the time of Moses “because of the hardness of your hearts,” an accommodation to man’s limited capacity for response (Matt. 19:8). The conclusion from Scriptural studies, which we share in common with “fundamentalists,” is that the original autographs contained no statements contrary to fact. This conclusion is based upon the expectation that superintending divine providence was adequate to insure that a genuine revelation from God would contain nothing untrue. The other consideration is that in numerous instances suspected “errors” are due to factors in transmission rather than faulty originals. Such a viewpoint is not necessarily our final word; we are always open to more light. It is not a position adopted because it answers all the questions and solves all problems; it rather appears to present fewer objections than other alternatives thus far presented.

This “evangelical” viewpoint is one with “neo-orthodoxy” in its recognition of man’s sinfulness and incapacity, the need and fact of divine revelation, the centrality of Christ in revelation and atonement, and in the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith. It is grateful to the “theology of crisis” for challenging the humanists to recognize the sinfulness of man, the necessity for revelation, and the cross as the objective grounds for atonement. Our chief difference comes at the point of the subjective validation of the Word of God. We consider it essential to insist that the Bible is equally authoritative to those who accept it as such and those who do not. All men will be judged in the light of it whether or not they actually heed it. To make the authority of the word of God dependent upon man’s ratification would lead ultimately to irresponsibility and hence relativism and anarchy. Such a viewpoint makes man the ultimate authority, since his response to revelation is necessary to give it authority. He cannot

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claim exemption from the Law simply because he fails to recognize its authority. We believe that the Bible *is* the Word of God, rather than that it *contains* or *becomes* the Word of God.

The decisive role of the subjective among the “neo-orthodox” is seen also in the concept of “faith.” While we do not hold that faith is dependent upon historical or archaeological authentication of every detail of Biblical data, we do think a factual basis is necessary for sound faith. We are not excited about the prospects of successful expeditions to Mt. Ararat to recover the remains of Noah’s ark. We are not dismayed when the archaeologists fail to find in the ruins of ancient Jericho full confirmation of the Book of Joshua. We recognize with Minear (*Eyes of Faith*) and others that there is a paradoxical quality in faith—that of seeing the invisible (Heb. 11:1; Rom. 8:24,25). In other words, a vital faith is not dependent entirely upon sensory experience; it is rooted rather in one’s inner grasp of spiritual reality. The “witness of the Spirit,” for instance, is the entrance of God into man’s consciousness in a manner quite convincing, yet not phenomenal. However, it does seem that the viewpoint represented in *Eyes of Faith* and Anderson’s *Rediscovering the Bible* is, to some extent, like arguing in a circle. Faith does not flourish in a vacuum nor arise without an originating cause. Simply because the church has “faith” is no assurance that the “faith” may not simply be credulity or superstition. Real faith must rest upon facts, rather than facts upon faith. To discount the historicity of the Scripture as essential to faith is to leave “faith” suspended on nothing more than subjectivism. The central doctrine of the resurrection is built upon a carefully ascertained discovery that the tomb was empty and that the body which occupied it was inhabited by the risen Christ. The evidence is built on what the earliest witnesses believed to be sensory experience: they found the tomb empty, they saw the risen Christ, heard him speak, felt of his wounds, ate breakfast with him and later declared, “That which we have seen and heard we proclaim unto you” (I John 1:3). The New Testament faith is based upon first-hand reports of factual events and the one authentic presentation of the evidence *is* the New Testament. Thus the “faith” should not be set in contrast to history and the book; the faith is dependent upon history and the book upon the faith. The book, moreover, is the chief factor in the continuity of that faith.

The alert student of the Bible views the present trend in Biblical studies with hope, without cynicism and yet with reserve about

assuming that the newest is thereby the truest. Pietists have too often been indifferent to or fearful of intellectual achievement. They have often lagged behind in Biblical scholarship. Since we are called upon to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, this constitutes, among other things, a call to love God with all the mental faculties. This is as much a part of the command as that of loving with all the heart. In this era of renewed activity in Biblical research evangelicals in the Pietist tradition would do well to make their full contribution to fresh and creative Bible study. This, in a small part, the current issue of *The Asbury Seminarian* seeks to do.