

Are We Beyond Biblicism ?

The revival of Biblical theology which is evident not only on the Continent but in America as well seems to be raising anew the question of the philosophy of the Christian Revelation. The scholars of the movement toward neo-Biblicism represent, in the first instance, a reaction against sheer historicism in favor of interpretative study of the Scriptures. Whatever may be said concerning the latent tendency within this 'school' toward the neglect of the historical context out of which the Judeo-Christian message came, it is still more important to notice the manner in which it poses the problem of the relation of human reason to the Christian revelation.

It is necessary to note, in passing, that the trend of the newer Biblical theology is a trend away from the Gospels toward Paul. Moreover, the thinkers responsible for this emphasis make much of the failure of philosophy, and may fairly be charged with inconsistency in their reasoned opposition to reason. One is inclined to inquire further whether their penchant for Paul is wholly consistent with their depreciation of the rôle of reason in its approach to the Christian faith.

Whether we wish to admit it or not, the theological world sits up and takes notice when Emil Brunner announces a new volume. His latest to be translated into English appeared in late 1946, under the title *Revelation and Reason*.¹ It goes without saying that the order in the title is significant to the author, who views the usual order, "Reason and Revelation" as a hold-over of Scholasticism. Professor Brunner seeks in this work to safeguard his theology against the danger

of becoming a type of dogmatic neo-rationalism, and to do so by the method of beginning with revelation and moving outward toward reason.²

The broadest characterization of the method of the author is that he seeks to develop the rational implications of the basic affirmations of the Bible, thought to be found chiefly in the writings of Paul. He majors upon the theme which has been dominant with the dialectical theologians, that the simple pure teaching of the Reformation has been obscured in the post-Reformation equation of revelation with the inspiration of the Scriptures, and by the attempt at the construction of a theory of revelation upon the basis of 'verbal inspiration.' In so doing the Church has forgotten her task of proclaiming "as absolute truth that which can be neither proved by the intellect nor verified by experience."³

In setting this type of proclamation in antithesis to the belief in 'verbal inspiration' Professor Brunner commits himself to what seems to us an unwarranted dogmatism in his insistence that modern scientific knowledge has "caused the collapse of the whole edifice of orthodox doctrine." It should be asked at this point upon what basis the dialectical theologians (of whom Brunner is one) pronounce the case of the orthodox view of the Scriptures to be closed? One gets the impression that this position must be accepted upon the authority of those declaring it. But is this rebellion against historicism necessary or warranted? Perhaps it is time to reopen this *closed* case, and to inquire whether the advances of natural and historical science have really served to prove their case.

¹ Philadelphia: The Westminster Press. xii, 440 pages. \$4.50.

² *Op. cit.*, p. ix.

³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 6f.

Our author describes the purpose of his volume as follows: "The formulation of a Christian and theological doctrine of revelation as a doctrine of believing knowledge."⁴ In developing this theme, the author recognizes that there exist positive relations between revelation and reason. These 'relations' seem to grow out of the fact that man possesses reason—a reason which may either affirm dependence upon revelation or else through a false assertion of its self-sufficiency become really irrational.

Few will fail to agree with Brunner in his assertion that the Biblical view of revelation is complex, and difficult to formulate. Many will appreciate also his contention that the Biblical understanding of revelation is completely different from that in non-Biblical religions, and that it is the distinctive element in Christianity which is essential and basic.⁵ In this connection, the reader will appreciate a quotation:

The closer consideration of the facts of the history of religion therefore show us that the common assumption that the Christian claim to revelation is opposed by a variety of similar claims of equal value is wholly untenable. The amazing thing is the exact opposite, namely that the claim of a revelation possessing universal validity in the history of religion is rare. The claim of revelation made by the Christian faith, however, in its radicalism, is as salutary as its content: the message of atonement.⁶

The faith by which revelation is received is, according to Brunner not a relation to an "it" but a personal relationship. In this connection, he insists upon placing in antithesis the two elements: trust in and obedience to the Lord of the Church, and historical Biblicism. This, it seems to the reviewer, is not necessary: may not "doctrinal belief in the Bible" be a

necessary part of an unconditional personal surrender to God?

Related to Brunner's doctrine of revelation as 'personal correspondence' is his attention to the question of the nature of man "before God" as ruling out any neutral view of human nature. Welcome is this emphasis upon human responsibility and the insistence that the varied explanations of responsibility upon the basis of human nature or of human society is in itself a form of unbelief.⁷ In the light of this, reason is restless and distorted, in the natural man, precisely because it is reason working against itself in failing to perceive the Word of God.

Section 2 of the volume, under the caption of "The Fact of Revelation," deals with the questions of Revelation in the Creation, Revelation as Promise, Revelation as Fulfillment, The Witness of Holy Scripture, The Witness of the Church, The Witness of the Spirit, and The Unity of the Revelation. In a sense this section continues Brunner's emphasis upon 'Correspondence' in *The Divine-Human Encounter*.⁸ Underlying the discussion is the familiar theme of the antithesis between 'Biblical faith' and the orthodox understanding of the Christian Scriptures. It is a bit distressing to hear again, in a discussion containing so much that is enlightening, the familiar themes, 'the Fundamentalists' bondage to the Biblical text', 'a paper pope' and 'God is not a "Book God".'

The major problem with which the latter half of the book deals is that of the relation between revealed truth and truth rationally understood. Whereas the latter is timeless, impersonal and logical, the former is living, given, personal, and appropriated. This leaves us with a dualism

⁴ p. 12.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 219ff.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 236f.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 55.

⁸ Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1943.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 369ff.

of (rational) truth and life. It is in the Logos that this dualism is overcome.⁹

Thus the two concepts of truth find a higher unity in Jesus Christ who is both 'the logos of reason' and the 'Person, the eternal Son' and in whom the impersonal is transcended in the personal. And while logical truth is 'awakened' in us, theological truth is apprehended in personal encounter. In this encounter rational theology is left far behind, faith operates, and the Living God speaks. The function of the Scriptures in this act of 'encounter' seems to be that of awakening 'faith' rather than that of imparting Christian truth.

Underlying all of Dr. Brunner's discussion here is his depreciation of the Biblicism of historic Christianity. If this reviewer correctly assesses *Revelation and Reason*, he finds its author increasingly occupied with a refutation of the classical orthodox view of the Scriptures. His section on "Biblical Faith and Criticism" adds little to that which the dialectical theologians have been saying concerning the supposed contrast between the orthodox doctrine of Scripture and the 'real Reformation doctrine of faith.' Many readers will feel that Brunner makes Luther's weakest affirmations concerning the Bible to be his classic affirmations. We wonder whether Luther's depreciation of the Epistle of James and the Book of Revelation rightly represent the Reformation view concerning the Christian Scriptures.

Nor is there much which is new in our author's statement of the historic conflict between the medieval views of space and time and those of Copernicus, Kepler and Lyell. For the present it will be necessary to let history pronounce its verdict upon Dr. Brunner's wisdom in asserting (apparently with approval) that "evolution has become part of the world

outlook of every educated person," or his assertion that "The Christian faith does not presuppose any definite view of the world as preferable to another."¹⁰

In the section under discussion, as well as in the book as a whole, the author leaves his system with the task of reconciling the *mythical* elements, which he alleges the Bible to contain, with the demands of the thinking man. He asserts, without clearly proving his point, that a Bible full of discrepancies, historical errors, and scientific inaccuracies is not mythical in the sense that the literature of non-Christian literature is mythical. This reviewer confesses his inability to see the cogency of this argument. Nor does Brunner help things greatly by his attempted re-definition of myth as "symbol of movement." It is true that the God of the Bible is high above man, and that His self-disclosure must utilize language intelligible to us. What is not so clear is, that He is limited to myth and symbol in revealing Himself to man.

Equally difficult to follow is Professor Brunner's insistence that in 'divine history' actual facts are unimportant and that much of Genesis is 'primal history' and without historical accuracy—that a credible record of the period of the Patriarchs has been completely lost.¹¹ It seems that he would restrict the historically credible part of the Bible to a selected and skeletal record of Jesus of Nazareth. It may be questioned whether the problem of symbol and myth can be solved as easily as our author thinks, i. e., by an appeal to 'this bit of world history' apart from the broader context of historical fact within which the Bible seems to set the life and work of the Lord Christ.

Along with this apologia for the use

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 281.

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 286.

of the term 'myth' in connection with the Christian Scriptures, Dr. Brunner suggests that his view of truth "finally changes our thought about the impropriety of the use of the category of personality for God."¹² It will be of interest to see what comment the Personal Idealists may make upon this feature. In a review of *The Divine-Human Encounter*¹³ this reviewer timidly suggested that Professor Brunner might be moving in the direction of contemporary Personalism; in *Revelation and Reason* there are further straws in this wind.

The discriminating reader will find a great deal in this volume which will

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 409.

¹³ In *Harvard Divinity School Bulletin*, 1943-1944, pp. 97f.

enrich his understanding of the contemporary theological scene. He will discover, moreover, that the dialectical theologians have a Fundamentalism of their own. *Revelation and Reason* embodies an able formulation of this. The book prompts also a number of questions. First: Why is Dr. Brunner increasingly concerned to combat traditional Biblicism? Can it be that it is now the chief competitor of the dialectical theology for the consideration of minds reacting against classical liberalism? And second: Is orthodox Biblicism really a thing of the past? Has modern scientific discovery really rendered it obsolete? If so, why so much expenditure of effort to discredit it?

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