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Biblical Theology: Past and Future

1.

Europe in the *eighteenth century* was affected at nearly every cultural level by the philosophical mood called the Enlightenment. This period was marked by intellectual advance on many fronts, including biblical studies. Lessing and Reimarus in Germany, Voltaire and Diderot in France, and Locke in England were the chief spokesmen for this new mood of rejection of tradition and abandonment of convention. It was inevitable that this critical spirit of fresh inquiry should eventually be brought to bear on the entire field of theology. In this post-Reformation era the concern of Protestant theologians tended to focus upon a rationalist structure of dogmatics which could be used for apologetic and polemic purposes against Rome. German pietism saw in the Bible a reservoir of theological data which, when assessed properly, could serve adequately as the handmaiden of scholastic theology. Even in pietism rationalistic structure took precedence, functionally if not formally, over the revelation in the Bible. The temper of the times was to strive for coherence, system, for a philosophical interpretation of the Christian religion which could be displayed as having total integrity.

Out of this complex of circumstances there arose a conviction that an injustice had been done to the truth of the Bible. It came to be *questioned* whether there was a total *identity* between *church dogma* and the *theology of the Bible*. A previously uncriticized assumption that the theology of the church was the theology of the Bible came under scrutiny, and conclusions were reached which challenged this assumption. The Reformation emphasis upon the centrality of the Bible as the Word of God and the renewed interest in historical and philological studies following the Renaissance gave rise to the discipline of Biblical Theology.

The term appears first in the writings of C. Haymann in 1708 in a book entitled *Biblische Theologie*. He was followed in 1757 by A. F. Buesching, a disciple of Semler, who also employed this novel term. Both men were German pietists who evidenced an incipient reaction against the excesses of dogmatic and scholastic theology. Buesching is especially important because he began the process of

separating dogmatic from biblical theology, but his efforts were not successful because he merely made biblical theology a form of non-scholastic dogmatics.

It remained to J. P. Gabler in 1787 to make the effective separation between systematic and biblical theology by postulating a difference in methodologies of the two disciplines.¹ His book for the first time established the boundaries between biblical and systematic theology. The result of Gabler's work was to create a new discipline in the theological curriculum, a discipline which was more than simply a counter to the excesses of independent dogmatics. After him biblical theology was recognized as possessing a spontaneous and positive validity of its own. The essential element in Gabler's methodology is the study of biblical history, for he established that biblical theology is historical, not philosophical or metaphysical, in nature; its function is not to buttress the preconceptions of systematic theology, but to lay bare the theology of the Bible itself. Once the point had been made that there was not complete identity between church dogma and the theology of the Bible, it was inevitable that a dogmatic theology which professed to be biblical must make peace with the doctrine of sacred Scripture. Biblical and systematic theology were seen to start with the same basic data, that is, the Bible; but the methodology of systematic and dogmatic theology is speculative and philosophical whereas that of biblical theology is historical. It does not and cannot concern itself with philosophy, not because philosophy is evil, but because its method is to expose and comprehend the Bible's own understanding of itself as it reveals the acts of God and their meaning for man's salvation. Its basic interest is in the history of salvation. In this new-found freedom the biblical theologians were given to intemperate criticism of dogmatic theology, but as time passed it was acknowledged that both disciplines dealt, or should deal, with the same body of data, but with differing methods. Both have the same ultimate goal: to bless the church. It was seen that one did not displace the other, but that there was a mutual dependence and interpenetration of the two approaches to theology. If systematic theology needs the corrective of biblical theology, the latter also needs the former, for systematic theology serves as a

¹ J. P. Gabler, *Oratio de justo discrimine theologiae biblicae et dogmaticae regundisque utriusque finibus* (1787).

check against the pursuit of minutiae in biblical theology. G. Ebeling well states that "the historian must be a systematic theologian if he is to be an historian, and the systematic theologian must be an historian if he is to be a systematic theologian..."² Although the primal concern of biblical theology is the history of revelation, it can ill afford the luxury of ignoring the work of the systematicians, for the historian approaches history with certain presuppositions and prejudices. It is the task of the systematician to assess these *a priori* of the historian, and if possible, to refine them. Obviously a biblical theology which rests upon a purely naturalistic view of history cannot do justice to the biblical view of history and revelation. An unbalanced pursuit of purely historical research will not yield biblical theology because biblical theology is *more* than history.

2.

The new discipline of biblical theology had begun to bear fruit when the German Rationalistic movement came into full bloom and the fortunes of biblical theology went into a sharp and prolonged decline. A least three significant factors contributed to the *near demise* of biblical theology in the *nineteenth century*. They are the rise and development of *historicism* as a means of so-called "objective" study of the Bible, a concomitant emphasis upon the *variety* of religious motifs in the Bible, and the acceptance of the *evolutionary* hypothesis as a radical explanation for the meaning of history. This era in biblical studies witnessed the development of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, or comparative religions approach to explain the meaning of the Bible.

The undergirding philosophy of this period of theological and biblical scholarship was that a scientific and responsible assessment of the Bible demanded a complete elimination of personal bias and opinion about the subject matter. An almost clinical detachment was required of the "honest" scholar so that he might present his findings with a minimum of personal involvement. If the scholar were committed in some conscious measure to the Bible, he was thought thereby to have lost his powers of objectivity. Coupled with this mood was a rampant naturalism which was vastly im-

² G. Ebeling, "The Meaning of Biblical Theology": *The Journal of Theological Studies*, N. S. 6 (1955), p. 225.

patient with any suggestion of an extraordinary operation of God in history; this naturalism did not seek to eliminate the Christian religion, but to modify it. The Bible came to be regarded as a collection of interesting religious elements collected by and for the Jews and the Christians of the first century. To affirm a "theology" of the Bible was thought absurd because the use of the word "theology" presupposes an order of mind and coherence of thought.

This historicist approach is symbolized well in the person of W. Wrede³, whose approach was an attempt at complete historical objectivity, and the intended result was a dispassionate analysis of the religion of Jesus and the early Christian community. He, like many others of the comparative religions school, was a statistician of religious motifs of the Bible. He was, moreover, atomistic in his treatment of these religious ideas of the Bible, especially the New Testament. He scorned any discussion of the unifying elements of the Bible as being artificial and forced attempts at harmonization. The works of Weiss and Beyschlag are criticized for devoting too much attention to the unity of the New Testament and superficially concealing the glaring variety of religious ideas. To this entire school the variety of religious elements in the Bible was so obvious as to preclude any possibility of unity; and, if there were no unity, it is therefore pointless to speak of the "theology" of the Bible. Holtzmann concurred with Wrede in laying greater stress on the dissimilarities of the Bible than on the similarities; he thought in terms of whole systems of doctrine in the Bible rather than of one body of doctrine. Weinel carried this attitude a step further in asserting that the biblical scholar must be free of any dogmatic interest and should make no judgments about the validity of the Bible⁴. The scholar's sole task is to ascertain the religious ideas of the Bible and to compare them with other religions of mankind. Evolution had suggested itself in the nineteenth century as a kind of omniscient explanation for all cultural and biological phenomena, and it is no surprise that it was also applied to the Bible. The initial assumption of much biblical scholarship

³ Who wrote his *Über Aufgabe und Methode der sogenannten neutestamentlichen Theologie* in 1897.

⁴ See A. Deissmann, *Light From the Ancient East*, p. 245, where Jesus is alleged to have had no interest in "book, formulae, and subtle doctrine...". See also p. 380.

was that religious development proceeded from lower to higher expressions; the idea of God evolved from polytheism to henotheism to monotheism. The whole of the Bible was thought to reflect this natural and inevitable augmentation of religious ideas. It is often observed that biblical scholars of this persuasion forced the Bible onto a "Procrustean bed" and required everything to accommodate to this pattern of development. What did not fit was conformed or rejected as a late emendation by some scribe, and what was recorded as an early but high religious expression was discounted and assigned to a later date. On the basis of the evolutionary hypothesis a higher or superior idea could not appear early. In the Old Testament such names as Wellhausen, Kuenen, Gunkel and Driver were associated with this general philosophy. "Pan-Babylonianism" ruled the day. In the Old Testament the religion of Israel was understood in terms of the surrounding Semitic religious cultures of the ancient near east. In New Testament researches Reitzenstein, Bousset and Deissmann, to name but a few, re-evaluated the New Testament and the rise of the Christian church in terms of contemporary Greek mystery religions. The death of Christ, the conversion of Paul, and the appearance of the church were explained as unconscious Jewish attempts to conform this new religion to the pattern of the Greek mysteries. The net effect of this approach was to eviscerate the Judeo-Christian tradition of any spontaneous content of unique revelation. As biblical theology was initiated by Gabler, its intention was to free the doctrine of the Bible from church dogma and distinguish between these two bodies of thought; but under the withering influence of Rationalism, historicism and evolutionary hypotheses, the complete distinction of biblical studies and church dogma took place. By the turn of the century, "Biblical scholars came to be more and more interested in the task of recovering the details of an ancient culture and in reconstructing the history of that culture. The question of the relationship of biblical scholarship to systematic theology eventually ceased to concern them"⁵.

While this temper of biblical scholarship held the field, the *conservative thrust* was not totally lost, but was preserved in the efforts of at least two outstanding scholars: Paul Feine and Adolph Schlatter. These two men resisted the historicizing tendency of the

⁵ G. B. Smith, *Journal of Religion* 5 (1925), p. 577.

day and sought to construct a biblical theology from other than an allegedly neutral standpoint. Feine, whose text on biblical theology was published in repeated editions, affirmed that the task of biblical theology belongs to the committed Christian; he held that the purely historical analysis of the New Testament blinds men to the true uniqueness of the Christian revelation. He was convinced that the New Testament should be understood as containing a theology, not merely a variety of religious patterns and motifs. His emphasis was upon the unifying aspects of the New Testament rather than upon an atomistic view. Schlatter tried to rescue the study of the New Testament from pure historical investigation by restoring the union of thinking and willing in order to deliver doctrine from an essay in pure abstraction. Specifically Schlatter argued against three errors: (1) the statistical approach to the New Testament which was used both by the historicists and by old orthodoxy in its "proof-texting", (2) against the rationalist concept of doctrine, and (3) against the comparative religions approach to the New Testament which destroyed its uniqueness. It must be confessed that these men fought a type of delaying action; their scholarship was a protest against the extremes of the scholarship of the day.

Concurrent with this cluster of ideas was the rise of the theology of Schleiermacher who proposed a scientific theology; he is rightly called the father of *liberal theology*. Harnack, working from this general position, devised an ethical reconstruction of Jesus so that the abiding validity of what Jesus said resided in his ethics. Jesus came to bring men into a conscious relationship to God so that they recognized his universal fatherhood. What elements in the message of Jesus did not fit into this reconstruction were cast away as the "husk" surrounding the ethical kernel. The husk was thought to be the eschatology of Jesus which reflected that Jesus, as an itinerant prophetic preacher from Galilee, was culturally a child of his times. Once this exterior was stripped away, the historian was able to seize upon the permanent value of Jesus.

Early in the *twentieth century*, A. Schweitzer overturned this entire ethical reconstruction in favor of discovering the true historical Jesus whose message included *eschatology* as well as ethics. Schweitzer contended that the eschatology of Jesus is as surely a part of his total message as is his ethics and, therefore, the eschatology was not husk, but part of the kernel itself. In his attempt to re-

cover the historical Jesus, Schweitzer eventually concluded that once having found this remote person he was compelled to return to the Christ of church invention. The historical Jesus, according to Schweitzer, was a somewhat fanatical Nazarene prophet who preached that the theocratic Kingdom of God was imminent and the time for repentance was now. When the Kingdom did not come, Jesus is thought to have hurled himself upon the Cross as a deluded and defiant zealot. While Schweitzer's conclusions hardly accord with the best of Christian thought, he did the service of reminding the church that the eschatology of Jesus is not able to be discarded in the interests of ethics alone. The message of Jesus includes both elements.

By the turn of the century the purely historical analysis of the New Testament thus began to come under criticism. The most obvious *deficiency of historicism* and rationalism is that it yielded such meagre results. Probably never have so many labored so zealously so long for so little. The spiritual welfare of the church was lost as a goal of this enterprise, and it tended to proceed in a direction independent of the life of the church.

Efforts of pure historical research of the Bible were seen to amass an enormous pile of facts, evidences, and data; but because historicism rejects any prejudices about the meaning of history, it cannot synthesize or come to any degree of final assessment about its findings. All historical study was a relativistic venture and conclusions were thought to be impossible to achieve. So the end of the matter was a sterile and arid collection of facts, but they were not to become the grounds of any subsequent action. Historicism has facts, but no story and no rationale. A. N. Wilder puts it well when he says: "The analytical historian kills the soul and retains the corpse."⁶ Even A. Ritschl objected to the purely historical approach of D. Strauss in these words: "Would a man who regards all music as a disagreeable noise undertake to write a life and an appreciation of Mozart? That were the true parallel to this atheistic method of writing the history of religion."⁷ The sheer fact of the Christian church demands more than a recital of

⁶ A. N. Wilder, "New Testament Theology in Transition", *The Study of the Bible Today and Tomorrow*, ed. H. R. Willoughby, p. 428.

⁷ *Justification and Reconciliation*, Edinburgh, 1902, p. 414.

the details of its growth, and this is precisely what the detached and objective historian is unwilling to provide.

A further criticism of this approach to history lies in the *rejection* of the *evolutionary* hypothesis by modern scholars. It came to be admitted that the coercion of all historical data into the mold of evolutionary development was at heart unrealistic and unscientific, for the proper procedure of the scientific method, whether one works with physics or history, is to allow the evidences to speak for themselves. In modern times W. F. Albright has favored what he calls an "organismic" view of history in place of the evolutionary hypothesis. Toynbee has not followed the evolutionary structure, but writes history in terms of drama and dynamic interaction of cultures and forces. Biblical historians began to concede that an earlier insight into the nature of God and man may be better than a later one. This reversal of attitude about history has seriously altered the 19th century procedure in biblical studies.

The mounting criticism of a faithless assessment of biblical history turned to the naive mental set of these "objective" historians. It dawned upon the world of biblical studies that the clinical approach to history is subject to two attacks: it is not possible, and it is not desirable. The proposed ideal of an open mind in the study of history is as elusive as a mirage, for every scholar inevitably comes to his study with presuppositions and convictions, many of which are buried so deeply that he does not know them. Albright calls this preconception a "proto-philosophy", and goes on to point out: "All recognized philosophical systems are constructed by a more or less rigorous use of deduction from postulates which cannot be proved and which are often meaningless in their wording."⁸ In the same vein Karl Barth speaks of the "fog" which envelopes everyone's mind, a philosophical bias which we have inherited, consciously or unconsciously, from the culture surrounding us. In view of this fact, the biblical scholar is somewhat more sophisticated today, admitting that he does not have the "open mind", and instead he strives to refine, articulate, and educate those presuppositions which govern his scholarship. The absence of presuppositions is not only not possible, but it is likewise not to be sought. It came to be recognized that historicism and science

⁸ W. F. Albright, "Return to Biblical Theology", *Christian Century* 75 (Nov. 19, 1958), p. 1328.

not only do not produce an acceptable theology; they do not even produce acceptable religion. If the biblical scholar engaged in linguistics and history, he was also obliged to become a theologian in order to grasp the inner meaning of the biblical revelation. Because it was essentially a theological endeavor, biblical theology became not less, but more discerning. The demand of faith and commitment were recognized as marks of maturity in scholarly study of the Bible. J. Haroutounian affirms that "the historical approach to the Bible and the biblical concern with history are radically different one from the other"⁹.

It may be questioned whether the purely objective study of history made any permanent and useful contributions to biblical scholarship. In fairness it must be pointed out that this mood contributed to a sense and demand for precision and concern for historical detail. No longer could responsible biblical scholars give themselves to broad and unsupported generalizations about history and religion. Accuracy and conciseness were required to be observed in biblical studies in order to be scientific.

It is a commonplace that the entire cultural spirit of the 19th century and early part of this century was severely injured in 1914-18, and dealt the mortal wound in the 1940's. The happy optimism about man's inevitable progress came to an end, and the religious liberalism of the era was found wanting as a viable theological explanation of God and man. In this situation of flux there arose the theological movement called broadly "Neo-Orthodoxy", of which Karl Barth was the chief spokesman and originator. His famed *Römerbrief* was in many respects the first gleam of a new temper in European theological studies, for it judged liberalism and called for a radical reappraisal of the whole theological scene.

3.

Contemporary biblical theology is a direct child and heir of this revolution in theology. The widespread reaction against unbridled optimism led to a rethinking of the urgency of the biblical message about redemption; if nothing else, the two world wars had indisputably established that man is a sinner and in dire need of the

⁹ J. Haroutounian, "The Bible and the Word of God", *Interpretation* 1 (July, 1947), p. 300.

grace of God. This feeling opened up the need and opportunity of biblical theology of a character quite different from that of Wrede, Holtzmann, and Harnack. Another factor aiding the recovery of biblical theology was the great number of discoveries of New Testament manuscripts and ancillary materials for biblical studies. The weight of these factors required a renewed consideration of the discipline.

In the modern period two men stand out as *precursors*: W. Eichrodt and C. H. Dodd. Eichrodt worked in the field of Old Testament in Europe, and Dodd in New Testament in Britain. Eichrodt's theology of the Old Testament was a deliberate attempt to reverse the atomizing tendency of earlier scholarship by holding that the concept of *covenant* is the unifying theme or element in the Old Testament. The Old Testament was presented as possessing an intrinsic unity throughout the patriarchal, kingly, and prophetic epochs through varying emphases of the covenant which God had set up between himself and Israel. The history of Israel's affairs is the history of her fidelity to this covenant which was made with Abraham and successively reaffirmed to Moses, David, and Isaiah. Dodd's contribution is encompassed in a powerful little volume, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments*, in which he contended that throughout the New Testament there is an essential unity which is revealed through the preaching in the book of Acts and in the body of doctrine in Paul's letters. The same elements of Gospel proclamation, or "kerygma", were discovered in the preaching of the Apostles and in the letters of Paul, Peter, and John. To Dodd, this was incontrovertible evidence of the basic unity of the New Testament. These two men brought about a centripetal effect to biblical scholarship in place of the older centrifugal or divisive influence. Moreover, a growing conviction of the integral relation of the Old and New Testament was seen; it had been the practice to separate the two halves of the Bible into almost dissimilar bodies of religious expressions. The New Testament came to be understood as the fulfillment of the Old, and the Old was the preparation for the New. This is not a novel concept, but is in fact simply the recovery of the conviction of the early church and the church fathers. The authority of the Bible came into its own, although there was by no means unanimity on the precise degree or authority it possessed.

Following Eichrodt and Dodd came such scholars as E. Stauffer, O. Cullmann and R. Bultmann who consolidated the gains initiated in the 1930's. Stauffer and Cullmann have laid stress upon the concept of *Heilsgeschichte* or "redemption history", which they took to be the unifying motif of not only the New Testament but the entire Bible. This is to say, within the stream of general or secular history there is a stratum of history which bears specifically upon God's activity among men for their salvation. Of the events of the Old Testament, the great saving event is the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, and supremely the saving event of the New Testament is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the contention of Cullmann and Stauffer that this biblical idea of time and history is both a recovery of an ancient idea in the church and promises to be the most fruitful methodology by which to interpret the New Testament, if not the entire Bible.

R. Bultmann stands *apart* from this position. He feels that the language and thoughts of the New Testament are too restricted culturally to the thought-forms of the first century. Therefore, the task of the scientific New Testament scholar is to remove these myths in order to approach the heart of the meaning of the Gospel message. Combined with this approach is a radical skepticism concerning the historical trustworthiness of the New Testament documents, particularly the Synoptic Gospels. His judgment is that since the early church was the producer of the New Testament, and since it was swayed by its commitment to Jesus Christ, the record is therefore highly colored and unreliable. However, what survives for the church today is the ethical imperative to *commitment*, to decide for God, for in so doing man becomes most fully what God intends him to be. Already it is being made clear that Bultmann's deep skepticism concerning the historicity of the New Testament is being challenged by his followers in such numbers that the mode is to speak of the "post-Bultmannians", who include G. Bornkamm, E. Kaesemann, J. Robinson, and E. Fuchs. These men, especially Fuchs, have presented evidence from the New Testament which demonstrates the highest degree of probability that there are elements of genuine and primitive history in the Gospels, and Bultmann has been compelled to modify the extremity of his charges. One of the disquieting factors in Bultmann's theology is his acceptance of several elements of the old comparative re-

ligions school of Bousset and Reitzenstein. His theology is a perpetuation in modern times of the thought of W. Wrede to whom he candidly confesses a great debt.

Because of this new post-war theological development there has been a significant *return* to sober biblical theology. This is not, however, to say that there are no remnants of the old syncretist philosophy among us. Within recent years E. F. Scott wrote a book entitled *The Varieties of New Testament Religion* in which he implicitly rejects the use of the word "theology" and clings only to religion in the New Testament. In much the same spirit E. W. Parsons wrote *The Religion of the New Testament*. Another scholar in the last decade proposed that Christians could profit greatly by recognizing the virtue of Baha-ism and its temple of nine doors, each one symbolizing one of the great religions of the world¹⁰. And J. Branton says vigorously: "There is no Christology of the New Testament; there are Christologies. There is no one divine plan of salvation; there are a variety of plans in the New Testament. There is no kerygma; there are kerygmas."¹¹

Today's biblical scholar is surfeited with a wealth of new materials at his hand for serious scholarship. One of the most monumental undertakings in a century has been the production, under the editorship of G. Kittel, of the *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*. Theologians from many universities in Europe have written masterful articles on all the key words of the New Testament, exploring their historical, philological, and theological implications. This work, not yet completed, will eventually consist of several massive volumes and is destined to be a prime reference source for many years. The entire world of biblical scholarship will derive incalculable profit from this extensive labor¹². In addition, the biblical theologian has such significant works as Cullmann's *Christ and Time* and his perceptive *Christology of the New Testa-*

¹⁰ S. V. McCasland, "The Unity of the Scriptures", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 73 (1954), p. 7.

¹¹ J. Branton, "Our Present Situation in Biblical Theology", *Religion in Life* 26 (Winter, 1956-7), p. 17.

¹² Enthusiasm for Kittel's *Wörterbuch* has been attenuated by many criticisms, especially at the point of its methodology and theological bias. These criticisms are summed up cogently by James Barr in his book entitled *Semantics of Biblical Language*, Edinburgh, 1961. See especially pages 206-262.

ment, Stauffer's *New Testament Theology*, Bultmann's two volume *Theology of the New Testament* and the Studies in Biblical Theology series of small but scholarly volumes edited by H. H. Rowley, C. F. D. Moule, F. V. Filson and G. E. Wright. This is to name but a few of the great number of books available today; there are dozens more books of real merit and hundreds of articles and monographs which bear on this lively discipline.

4.

Is it possible to make a preliminary survey of the present position in biblical theology? What *lessons* have been learned from the past?

It is generally admitted that more attention should be given to the *unity* of the Bible than to dissimilarities. It is one of the identifiable marks of Liberalism that it was blind to the essential coherence of the Bible, and it should be a mark of the new temper of our day that the Bible is a unity within, and expressed through, a variety of emphases and forms of thought. The biblical theologian today, in reacting against older analytical methods of Bible study, is in danger of fleeing to the opposite pole by demanding an unrealistic and artificial unity of thought in the Bible where it may not exist. For example, it is hard indeed to see how the Song of Solomon is very much like Paul's Letter to the Philippians in word or general intention. There has been too much effort in recent times to see a unity of theology in certain words of Scripture where a critical examination of the language will not support the thesis. This means that today's biblical scholar has approached the Bible with a predetermination to see there what he wants to see. So the ancient issue of bias rears its head again. Unity may exist at the expense of bad linguistics where dissimilarities are swept under the scholar's rug. Secondly, mature scholarship in this field must still be deeply concerned for the history and language of the Bible; it is impossible to turn the clock back to the 16th century. But the simultaneous impossibility of retreating to historicism requires to be recognized. Compilation of facts yields neither good history nor good theology. Thirdly, a confessional approach to history, and especially the history of the Bible, is mandatory if theology is to be the outcome. Our generation demands not only religion, but a

religion that is theologically coherent and responsible. Barth is correct in urging a "pneumatic" or spiritual exegesis of sacred Scripture. A treatment of the Word of God which never rises above the considerations of linguistics and history is tried and found wanting. It is not erroneous because of this method: it is incomplete. Such an approach is freighted with risk, for it is possible to give way to mysticism and subjectivism in exegesis and a "pneumatic" method is difficult to define with theological precision¹³, but a proper symmetry of inductive study and spiritual commitment will yield a theological understanding of the Bible. Lastly, the insights afforded by *Heilsgeschichte*, redemptive history, will bear much fruit in theology because it is the most comprehensive unifying element of the Bible. This is one of the assured results of biblical theology in recent years. However, a careless and vague usage of this term may result in merely a cultic slogan which can be redeemed only by accurate definition.

It is well at this point to bring into focus the fact that biblical theology, like every other branch of the theological curriculum, is a *pursuit* rather than an achievement. Who would dare to say that the final systematic theology has been written, or that a biblical theology has been written that will forever render all other attempts obsolete? The probable reason why such a question cannot be answered in the affirmative is that since the Bible reflects the mind of God, and since God is by definition infinite, it is impossible for the human understanding to grasp the Word of God with complete finality. This lies beyond human competence. Biblical theology, like other aspects of theology, must proceed by hypothesis, debate, investigation, correct procedure, and in view of the fact that God has spoken and man must listen. We are involved in a spiritual and a confessional enterprise. H. G. Wood has said with some perception that he is "tempted sometimes to suggest a paradox, to the effect that the finality of Christian faith is to be discerned in the non-finality of any given formulation of it"¹⁴.

What are the larger implications of this renaissance of biblical theology for the whole *church*? Some feel that Christianity is confronted by a more sobering peril than at any time since the days

¹³ See Barr (n. 12), pp. 276 f.

¹⁴ H. G. Wood, "The Present Position of New Testament Theology: Retrospect and Prospect", *New Testament Studies* 4 (1958), p. 181.

of ancient Rome. Communism is openly inimical to the Gospel, and is avowedly bent on the elimination of the Christian faith. Christianity is not winning the battle against the Moslem faith. It is also committed to oppose cultural paganism, secularism, and, perhaps worst of all, sheer indifference. Christendom is divided against itself. Even Protestants are found spending their energies in witless argument. It is noteworthy that it is not a biblical or systematic theologian, but an archaeologist, W. F. Albright, who has urged a return to the Bible and its truth and power as the corrective and source of spiritual dynamic for this generation of the church. He says, "Like John the Baptist and Jesus, who turned back to the prophets of Israel for inspiration, and like the great Reformers, who sought guidance from the Word of God, so must we."¹⁵

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Which *direction* biblical theology will take in the coming decade is, of course, impossible to predict with any accuracy. It is probable that the Bultmannian tension will continue for some time, although in a modified form; in fact, as is well known, this modification has already begun. In the long range view it may be ventured that the thesis of Bultmann will be relegated, like those of Baur, Wrede, and others, to the museum shelf of biblical studies, for it is too closely allied with the contemporary philosophical temper of the times. When this mood changes, Bultmann's thesis will also vanish.

Our concern for the future of biblical studies lies in the possible areas of fruitful investigation. Three themes suggest themselves: 1. the biblical view of *inspiration*, 2. the *ecumenical* movement and 3. the idea of the *church*. These are but three themes which need to be re-examined in the light of the best of the methodology of biblical research, but the list could be extended.

The day is past when a view of the Bible's *inspiration* may be drawn up to accord with some dogmatic preconception about accuracy or validity. Not the least of the criticisms of this approach is that it tends to be philosophical rather than biblical, dogmatic rather than apostolic. The time is ripe for another look at the problem, and the correct starting-point must be an inductive study

¹⁵ Albright (n. 8), p. 1331.

of the Bible's own witness concerning its inspiration. It is incorrect to commence with a notion about inspiration, and then to ransack the Bible to find evidences to support that prior notion. The Bible's self-testimony must be the prime concern. Key words need to be explored from the standpoint of etymology, the meaning in the common speech of the day of the writer, and lastly, what words like "inspiration" and "God-breathed" mean in their larger sentence context. Too often in the past any biblical statement about its own inspiration has been overloaded with doctrinal considerations which demand that a passage, for example, II Tim. 3: 16, reflect the convictions of the reader concerning historical, scientific, logical and even theological "accuracy".

Barr¹⁶ raises an interesting issue when he notes that while biblical scholars no longer refer to proof texts, the fashion today is to refer to proof words. He legitimately questions if this is "progress". The full sense of the Bible's inspiration lies not necessarily in separate words, but in the thrust of the individual writer's sentence and paragraph.

A second theme which may well bear continued thought from the standpoint of biblical theology is the *ecumenical* concern of our day. The writer confesses sometimes to an uneasiness that the practical urgency of the ecumenical movement stems from the unconscious urge for clean and efficient administration. This is by no means to suggest that biblical theology and efficiency are opposed to each other, but it does mean that if the ecumenical movement is to be distinctively Christian, its basic impulse must come from the Bible and not from a handbook on efficient management techniques. Ecumenicity not only may be jeopardized by a tendency to efficiency for its own sake, but also by purely sociological concerns. It is clear that this was the basic feeling of early American ecumenicity, but there has been a revival of theological interest in recent years. Sociology has much to say concerning the movement, and the leaders of ecumenical enterprises cannot afford to ignore what these scholars may say. But an ecumenicity which is divorced from a basic concern for revelation cannot claim to be Christian. What Jesus said about the church being "one", or what Paul wrote about "one faith" is more significant for the ecumenical movement than any other kind of consideration.

¹⁶ Barr (n. 12), p. 271f.

Some of the questions to which careful biblical theology might address itself are: What is the real nature of ecumenicity? What is the meaning of unity? What is the relationship of the churches to the church? What does the Bible say about this idea? Is there a detectible progression from Jesus' thought to Paul's in the matter of unity? Does the ecumenical movement have any antecedents in Old Testament thought? Are divisions within the church as they presently exist essentially evil? If so, what is the nature of that evil? Does the Bible speak to the contemporary question of a rapprochement with Rome? These and many more concerns of ecumenicity are the legitimate concerns of biblical theology and, if the ecumenical movement ignores its theological roots, it will be seriously impoverished, and, if biblical theology makes no contribution here, it will have failed in its obligation.

Lastly, the matter of the *church* grows out of the question of the ecumenical movement. It is well known that for the past several decades there has been a continuing critical self-examination of the church. Since the days of the decline of the social Gospel, the cry has been, "Let the church be the church." This is a correct direction to take in self-criticism, but appears to report more about what the church is not rather than what the church is. It is nothing new to observe that Jesus Himself is the originator of the church, and, therefore, His words take on unparalleled meaning. He not only employed the word "church" but also spoke of it as a vine. Paul used several images to suggest the nature and duty of the church, such as "the body of Christ", "the bride of Christ", and he also compared it to the marriage relationship between a man and a woman. Much of the study of the idea of the church has attempted to draw out a single unifying statement of its nature. However, it is interesting that neither Jesus nor Paul did this, but expressed what the church is in several metaphors, no one of which was adequate to indicate entirely what was meant by the term. Biblical theologians may have been guilty in recent times of coercing the biblical terms into one unified but artificial statement of the nature of the church. This tendency is seen in the two occurrences of the word 'church' in Matt. 16:18 and 18:17, where it is quite clear from an examination of the contexts that although the Greek word is the same, the meaning is by no means the same. The entire semantic value of a word may or may not be reflected in each particular

appearance of that word. So not only the contemporary church needs to continue its spirit of ascertaining what the church is, but also the biblical theologians' task is not finished in studying the New Testament witness concerning the church. Biblical theology has a strong corrective for dogmatic studies, but it will not fulfill its promise until it has made peace with proper linguistic procedure which must be united with a spirit of devotion to the Bible as the authoritative written Word of God.

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