

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Evangelical Theology.

BY THE REV. S. B. BABBAGE, M.A., Ph.D., C.F.

I HAVE been allocated the subject, "Evangelical Theology." It is well that we clarify our terms of reference. Our subject is *evangelical* theology. The word "evangelical" not only qualifies, but determines our theology. It therefore means, negatively, that our theology is not erected upon any humanistic or philosophic basis: it is positively erected on the foundation of the Word of God. Our theology is grounded or founded, on the Evangel or good news of God's saving act in Jesus Christ. The Pauline statement that "other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. iii. 11), although having a primary reference, to the only basis on which an individual can build his Christian faith, is nevertheless, equally essential as the basis for an intellectual formulation of the faith. That is to say, our theology is grounded in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

Such a warm evangelical conception of theology is in diametric opposition to those conceptions of theology which have been prevalent during the last few decades. Let me quote from McConnachie:

"The root cause of the crisis in the Church and in the pulpit is to be sought in our theology. Recent theology has been a very human, man-centred concern, making much of relative values, like history and psychology, but strangely silent about the Word of God, as a Word of absolute authority. It has skilfully rounded off the rough edges of the Cross to make it fit into the building of modern thought. It has ignored the eschatological side of the Gospel as being little better than what Dean Inge has described as 'Jews' old clothes', and it has kept the Last Things out of sight. Strongly apologetic in its interests, it has caught eagerly at any crumbs of comfort dropped by scientists in its anxiety to appease the modern mind. There have been great exceptions, of course, men like Dr. P. T. Forsyth, Dr. Denney and others, who have refused to bow the knee to the Baal of Modernism, but the general tendency has been in the opposite direction."

(*The Barthian Theology*, p. 24.)

Inevitably the presuppositions on which a theology is constructed will affect the whole of the superstructure. If a theology is erected on the liberal conception of the natural goodness of man, sin will be interpreted as ignorance or weakness, rather than as rebellion and pride against God. If a theology is erected on the naturalistic basis of evolutionary progress, the Kingdom of God will lose its eschatological significance, and will be identified with some human Utopia. Theology will only remain true to its task, as it bases itself on the evangelical doctrines of sin and judgment, redemption and grace. Theology must be "evangelical theology."

While evangelical theology is grounded on the Word of God, it is, at the same time, necessarily related to the changing needs of successive generations. We rightly believe that our faith was "once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3), but although our faith remains eternally the same, the garments in which it is clothed will change from age to age. Thought-forms tend to become old and antiquated

and archaic. The truth needs to be restated and clothed afresh in modern concepts. The faith must be made living and vital and relevant ; it must be elucidated and explained. Further, it is inevitable that problems should vary from time to time, and that different facets of the faith should need to be emphasised to meet the varying needs of particular periods. Consequently, the faith itself remains the same, while the comprehension, interpretation, and presentation, will change with each successive age.

The interpretation and presentation of the faith in terms of contemporary life is the prime task of theology. Because of the flux and change that attend all historical development, and the differing needs of new generations, it is futile to attempt the revival of a dead theology. Each age needs its own theology ; that is, a theology which is a living reality through its relationship to the needs of that age. Thus theology is the perennial concern of the Church. No doubt it has been this vital and dynamic character of theology which has given it the title of "queen of the sciences."

Since theology is concerned with nothing less than the right manner of preaching of the Evangel, the Church must continually meditate and reflect upon the proclamation of the Word of God. The whole task of theology—the interpretation or presentation of the faith—is to enable the Word of God to have "free course and be glorified." "Theology means *ministerium verbi divini* (the ministry of the Word of God) and nothing else", (Barth). For this reason, evangelical theology must be the concern of all ministers of the Gospel. The task of the preacher is the proclamation of Christ and Him crucified, and this, in essence, is the task of theology. As Barth truly states, theology "endeavours to take what is first said to it in the revelation of God's reality, and to think it over again in human thoughts and to say it over again in human speech . . . It articulates again the articles of faith."

While the task of the preacher and the theologian are basically the same, there is plainly a difference in function. The difference is really a difference of service. "The work done by theologians is not done for a small group of people with an interest in that hobby," wrote P. T. Forsyth twenty-five years ago, "it is not sectional work at all. It is done first of all for the preachers and their preaching, and through them for the public on the question of most universal moment." And the testimony of Karl Barth is parallel : "The dogmatician is the teacher *in* the Church *from* the Church *for* the Church, not as savant, but as one who has vocation to teach." The theologian is not indulging in some idle intellectual game. He is acting responsibly as a watchman, criticising, examining, safeguarding the Church's proclamation. He continually weighs the proclamation of the Church, testing its genuineness by reference to the real judge : the Word of God. As John the Baptist pointed to the Christ, so theology points from the confusions and conflicts of contemporary life to the revelation of God.

But what is the Biblical justification for this concern with theology, even though it be evangelical theology? The justification must be found in the fact that theology is the daughter of doctrine, and in the New Testament, doctrine is the handmaid of faith. The New Testa-

ment contains no such abortion as a non-doctrinal faith. God's gracious acts in Christ all have doctrinal implications. The first Christian preachers did not just preach mere historical facts about Christ and the Resurrection; they preached those indubitable historical facts, but they also preached an interpretation of those facts, which gave to those facts their significance and value for faith. As bare facts of historical interest the deeds of the New Testament have little more than antiquarian significance. For instance, the Cross at the most can only be a tragic episode of casual interest, unless it be seen by faith as the place where the Son of God was made a sin-offering for us. It is the ineradicable conviction of the Christian Church that at Calvary an eternal redemption was wrought for mankind, and it is this conviction which gives to Calvary its eternal and sacred significance. Further, Paul has left us a record of the apostolic faith—the Kerygma—with which he was entrusted. It was a doctrinal inheritance: a Gospel. "I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received," says St. Paul, "how that Christ died." That was the historical fact. (I pass over the striking fact that even in this historical statement Paul uses the doctrinal term "Christ"). But what Paul received was more than this: it was an interpretation of this fact: "How that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures:" (i Cor. xv. 3). And when Paul says "for our sins" he makes a doctrinal statement. He rises from history to doctrine. This is no Pauline eccentricity. Doctrine is woven as warp and woof into the whole of the New Testament. It is found in the Synoptics. Christ Himself taught that "He must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day" (Matt. xvi. 21). This was no reckless and impulsive act of self-sacrifice; it was the deliberate surrender of His life as a ransom for many. It was the laying down of His life for the sheep. Thus the Cross was not the unfortunate martyrdom of the Galilean Teacher—such would be the interpretation of a non-theological liberalism, which had discarded the doctrinal interpretations of the New Testament—but for faith it was the place where God acted in holy judgment and saving grace. Consequently, the New Testament conception of the faith and the apostolic preaching, implies doctrine, and doctrine implies theology.

To recapitulate: evangelical theology, based on the Evangel of Jesus Christ, seeks to facilitate the proclamation of the Word of God by expounding the biblical doctrines in terms which are relevant to the contemporary situation. The history of theology will reveal the attempts which have been made by the human spirit to "seek some clothing of conception for its faith, suited to its degree of knowledge and culture." (Orr). Theology must therefore be the continual pre-occupation of the Church: a task of perennial concern to the ministers of the Gospel. Neglect will lead to ambiguity and confusion in the matter which is our prime concern—the proclamation of the Word.

Let us examine the question concretely. There are certain doctrinal principles which remain the same throughout the ages. These are the principles which were re-affirmed with such clarity by the Reformers: the fallen state of man, original sin and the enslavement of the will; salvation, mediated through Christ the Redeemer, and

appropriated by faith; the sovereignty of God, etc. Evangelical theology will tenaciously hold these and such like doctrines, for many of these doctrines have been rightly exalted into dogmas in the credal and confessional statements of the Church. At the same time evangelical theology will recognise that different periods of history demand different emphases: inevitably certain aspects of theological controversy and concern become antiquated and irrelevant with the passage of time. It is worth noting, in passing, that the great subject disturbing theologians in the post-Reformation period was sub- and super-lapsarianism, that is, the question whether God merely permitted or ordained the fall of Adam. This question is now only of historic interest. It is natural that theologians today are concerned with matters which were either taken for granted or were ignored in yesterday's theological controversy. It is, therefore, imperative that we diagnose today's situation, so that we reach a resultant emphasis appropriate to our need. The present catastrophic conditions of contemporary life suggest at once certain obvious emphases: God's providence in history, crisis and judgment, eschatology and the Christian doctrine of the resurrection. A diagnosis of the present situation will reveal the futility of optimistic humanism, the precarious character of secular civilisation and culture, the radical nature of evil and the depths of iniquity to which men may sink, the paganism and superstition of much so-called modern belief, the inherent pride of man, and the reliance on the "gods" of nationalism, whether they be totalitarian or democratic "gods." It is for this reason that a truly evangelical theology will regard as irrelevant, such discussions as are prevalent in our circles about conditional immortality and millenarianism. As sublapsarianism speculated about matters at the beginning of time or before time, so these present day preoccupations concern matters which belong either to the end of time or after time. In any case they are speculative and hypothetical: they are side-issues unrelated to the desperate needs of sinful men and women. The task we are called to is proclamation—kerygma—uttering the call of the herald who makes known what no one has known before and who comes as a bringer of Good News.

It is significant that a revival of theology is a feature of the universal Church; it is not the prerogative of evangelicals. To some extent the unparalleled nature of the present world crisis is responsible for this revival: the shaking of things that are, has led to a search for things which cannot be shaken. On the one hand, this has led to a fresh interest in Thomist philosophy and theology, on the other hand, to a revival of neo-Calvinism.

I have been asked particularly to deal with some of the specific contributions which contemporary Continental thought can be expected to make to our evangelical theology. For the broad general outline of what follows, I am indebted to Dr. Walter Marshall Horton's book on Contemporary Continental Theology.

In the first place, neo-Calvinism has reaffirmed the crucial centrality of the Word of God. It has asserted that the biblical revelation is the norm, by which all theological formulations must be judged. The Bible is the central pillar on which the whole edifice of Christian theology must rest. Man needs to come to the Word of God to be

judged, not to judge : the attitude of the Christian scholar must be one of reverence and humility and submission, so that he hears God the Holy Spirit speaking in the Word. For the evangelical theologian the Bible is significant to faith, not because it is classic literature, not because it is primitive history, not even because it is a compendium of moral ideas nor because it is a treasury of spiritual insight, but because it is the revelation of God. "The Bible has once more become to us what it was to our fathers, a personal Word from a living God, speaking directly to our present state." (Horton). It is interesting to read how the Bible became a living reality to Barth. His friend, Thurneysen, has described how they found themselves without a gospel to preach : "We read the Bible in a new way. We read it more respectfully, more as an eternal Word addressed to us, and to our time. We criticised it less. We read it with the eyes of shipwrecked people whose all had gone overboard. The Bible appeared in a new light. Beyond all interpretations, its genuine word began to speak again ; the word of forgiveness, the Gospel of the coming Kingdom. . . ." Subsequently Barth gave expression to his conviction that the Bible is the Word of God to man. "It is not the right human thoughts about God which form the real content of the Bible," Barth wrote, "but the right divine thoughts about man. The Bible tells us, not how we are to speak to God, but how God has spoken to us, not how we are to find a way to God, but how He has sought and found a way to us." This emphasis is fundamental to any right approach to the problems of the theology.

Secondly, Reformed theology on the Continent has been led to stress the transcendence of God. Soren Kierkegaard, during the first half of last century, uttered his polemic against the pantheistic confusion of the Creator and the creature : in contradistinction to all this, he asserted the infinite qualitative distinction between God and man. It is not easy to appreciate Kierkegaard's contribution, for he created a completely new terminology. He spoke of "existential," the "Moment," "tension," "contingent contemporaneousness," and "the impact of the perpendicular upon the horizontal." But his most insistent theme was that "we are always in the wrong as against God," for God is in heaven and we are upon earth. Thus he will have nothing to do with the so-called God, reached by inference from the moral law, as with Kant ; neither will he have anything to do with the so-called God, reached by speculative thought, as with Hegel ; nor with the so-called God, reached in the depths of feeling, as with Schleiermacher. (Martin). God is the One known through the leap of personal decision in response to the challenge of Christ. He is the Absolutely Different, the Wholly Other from man, the God Who remains hidden in His judgment and wrath, until the leap of decision is made. In all this Kierkegaard was prophetically protesting against the immanentist evolutionary pantheism of the optimistic nineteenth century. The lesson he taught has been well learnt by the theologians of neo-Calvinism, and we ourselves do well to remember that God is the transcendent Lord, Whose thoughts are not our thoughts, and Whose ways are not our ways.

Yet again, the Continentals have caused us to realise afresh the dread abysses of sin into which men may, and actually do sink. No

writer has been more responsible for this new realisation than the Russian novelist Dostoievsky, although he himself declared that he was "a child of unfaith and scepticism." It was his peculiar contribution to illustrate the imperishable reality and worth of the free human spirit, even when it was manifested in crime, insanity, and self-destruction. More particularly, he described the tragic depths which are present in every human soul. In his later writings he glimpsed the truth that through free surrender to Christ, the God-Man, the human urge to freedom might find fulfilment.

While Dostoievsky showed from life the dread cancer of sin in the lives of men, Kierkegaard showed psychologically that the sense of fear under the stress of the consciousness of guilt, leads to despair.

"Man in time is confronted by the judgment of the absolute, and turn where he will, to aesthetics, to ethics, or to religion, he cannot escape that consciousness nor find any solution of his existence. Sin then is the fundamental fact of man's spiritual and moral position, the rock on which all philosophical attempts to explain the world and man's position within it, are wrecked. It is a basic disturbance of life, a final contradiction of man's being. 'Sin,' says Kierkegaard, 'is the gaping wound of human existence'; it is not something which man does but something which he is, in himself, the qualitative ruination of his inner being. It stands for the autonomy which man asserts for himself as against the absoluteness of God, and thus sin is being in untruth. Until therefore man comes to the truth as it is in Jesus Christ, whatever he does is sin, since he himself is in the untruth in his relation to the absolute reality of God."

(*Martin, H. V. : The Prophet of the Absolute, pp. 38-9.*)

It is good for us to be reminded of the reality and depth of sin : "our offence is rank : it smells to heaven : " it is rebellion against a holy and righteous God.

Fourthly, the Continentals have seen the power of evil in all its stark awful ramifications. Otto Piper and Karl Heim have affirmed their belief in the activities of a personal devil, while others have more cautiously spoken of satanic and demonic forces. Evangelicals have not tended to minimise the devices and deceptions of the devil, but it is significant that the pressure of historical circumstances on the Continent has exploded the shallow liberal dismissal of the power and ubiquity of evil. The biblical record is emphatic that we wrestle against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. (Eph. vi. 12). The rise of totalitarian demagogues and dictators, has added fresh point to the Johannine testimony that already there are many antichrists. It has become patent that this is no rhetorical exaggeration ; the spirit of the evil one is rampant and malevolent.

Further, both Bishop Aulen's "Christus Victor" and Emil Brunner's "The Mediator," have led to a new study of the Atonement. The fresh realisation of the demonic power of evil, has led to a new consideration of the cosmic aspects of Christ's redemption. This is only re-emphasising what Paul declared in the Epistle to the Colossians: that Christ in His Cross not only blotted out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, but also spoiled principalities and powers (the satanic powers spoken of in Ephesians), making a show of them openly, and triumphing over them in it—that is, in the Cross. (Col. ii, 15). Thus a recovered understanding of the enormity of evil, and sinfulness of sin, has led to a fresh realisation of the profound

significance of Christ's redemption. It has banished any cheap and hasty ideas of the Cross. Dr. Horton makes this comment : " so soon as these dark realities (of sin) begin to take cosmic proportions, it becomes evident that the problem of world deliverance is a three-cornered affair, involving the rescue of man from the cosmic powers of darkness as well as from the darkness in his own nature, and the resulting alienation from God. "

It would be possible to amplify the contribution which the Continentals are making : it would be possible, if time allowed, to speak of the new conception which has developed of the relationship between Church and State, a conception which has been conceived under the stress of conflict, and the duress of concentration camp ; it would be possible to speak of the new approach which has been made towards a biblical eschatology ; it would be possible to explore the new conception of the paradoxical relationship of time and eternity, where eternity ceases to be time endlessly prolonged, but becomes a category infinitely and qualitatively different ; it would be possible to show the fuller interpretation of faith as a decision of the whole subjective personality in the moment of believing ; but the topics which have been enumerated ; the Word of God, the transcendence of God, the depths of sin and evil, the reality of Satan, the atonement, are sufficient to indicate the relevance of Continental theology to our own task of formulating for our day and generation an adequate and satisfying evangelical theology. Taking our stand on the biblical revelation of the Word of God, we must avoid on the one hand the Charybdis of humanism, and on the other hand, the Scylla of quietism : our evangelical theology must correct both " the humanistic stress upon the value of works in themselves on the one hand, and the pietistic stress upon faith alone which so often leads to quietism. " (Martin).