

In the Study

It is only our characteristic insularity that has concealed from us the impasse which British New Testament scholarship has reached. We are aware of the limitations of an approach to the gospel records, governed by psychological or biographical concerns. We know something of the futility of the attempt to separate theology and history in the narrative of the Evangelists, to peel away the endless interpretative coverings in the hope of revealing the "bare fact" in its stark simplicity. We confess the folly of the endeavour to drive a wedge between the Jesus of history and the Christ of apostolic faith.

Yet the road of positive advance still largely eludes us. Either we continue the search along familiar roads, cautiously claiming a few scraps of pre-resurrection evidence of unimpeachable historical authenticity, or else we forsake the quest entirely, take our stand upon the faith of the primitive church, deny the possibility and the necessity of any penetration behind it. Cushioned by the conservatism of British scholarship, and often bewildered and shocked by the radical subtleties of the Bultmannic position, we take refuge in retreat or evasion.

It is thus salutary to be reminded of important recent continental developments, of the real advance that has been registered by disciples of Bultmann on the very basis of the master's work. Old questions are being asked in a new way, and answered with the promise on the basis of the adoption of new procedures and fresh objectives. What is the relation between the message of Jesus and the kerygma of the Church? Can that message be rightly understood until it is seen as dependent upon the action and conduct of the Lord? Will not our estimate of the continuity between the apostolic preaching and the proclamation of the Lord be decisive for the theological problem of the reality or otherwise of the Christ of our faith? These are the questions which Käsemann, Diem, Fuchs and Bornkamm are asking and answering to vital and positive effect. Perhaps it is too readily assumed that historical conclusions carry theological corollaries. Nevertheless, it is the merit of a recent study¹ that it enters into this succession, states the issues clearly, and breaks new ground.

¹ *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus*, by James M. Robinson, S.C.M. Press, Ltd. 9/6d. 1959.

The old quest of the historical Jesus broke upon the recognition of the Gospels as primarily sources for the history of the early church, and of the kerygma as constituting their centre. The rear-guard action of C. H. Dodd in attempting to establish a kerygmatic chronology of the public ministry was a desperate attempt to underpin the tottering foundations; and its widespread uncritical acceptance should not blind us to its essential weakness. But the possibility of a new quest remains. There is no overwhelming reason for history for faith through their identification of the humiliated pessimism. The Evangelists themselves insist upon the relevance of Jesus with the exalted Lord. The kerygmatic eschatological interpretation of the Christ inevitably made the historical Jesus theologically crucial.

In certain respects, modern man stands in the position of the early disciples. They possessed both their Easter faith and their factual memory of Jesus. It was the interaction of these two ways of knowing that provided us with our Gospels. Until comparatively recent times we could not penetrate behind the synthesis they effected. It is the rise of scientific historiography that has put into our hands a new tool of research and a new avenue of access to the past. It is surely providential that this weapon has become available at a time when the state of New Testament research demands of us a firm grasp of the real historicity of Jesus in the flesh of His incarnation.

In a concluding chapter, J. M. Robinson offers a brave attempt at the establishment of the procedure for the new Quest. If we adjudge it provisional and tentative, the author will not protest. At least he has pointed us in the right direction. A good deal of hard thinking will have to be done with reference to the precise place of the Lord in the eschatological time-scheme that the New Testament supplies. Much consideration will need to be given to the adequacy and legitimacy of the existentialist categories employed. But without any doubt, British New Testament scholarship should grapple more intensively with the understanding of history and historicity that we associate with Dilthey and Collingwood. It is faulty understanding here that has played so large a part in perpetuating the present impasse. When we have learned that Jesus' understanding of his own existence is a possible subject for historical research, we may find not only that an encounter with the historical Jesus is possible but that it proves identical with an encounter with the meaning of the New Testament kerygma.

That kerygma is most systematically expounded in the Epistle to the Romans. It is a writing that has proved fateful in the history of the Christian Church; and heirs of the continental Reformation find it especially difficult to escape its fascination. It was therefore not surprising that Emil Brunner should have entered the field as

commentator, and English readers must now be grateful to H.A. Kennedy for a wholly adequate translation of *Der Romerbrief*. The result is to make available to us a volume² that deserves and will surely secure wider attention than many of the existing studies of the Letter to the Romans.

For this is not, in the technical sense, a critical commentary. It lacks the learned discussion of variant readings and comparative scholarly positions. It eschews the distracting footnote and the lengthy reference to other authoritative discussion. Its task is the exposition of the meaning of the Epistle and its relevance to our time. It seeks to confront us with the God who has spoken and will yet speak to those prepared for such confrontation. It is a theological commentary, supplemented by concluding studies of the meaning and significance of some of the key ideas in Pauline teaching.

As such, it should commend itself to the Ministry and also prove of immense value to those laymen prepared for a serious grappling with the Word of God. Dr. Brunner always makes Paul intelligible. His clarity of thought and expression have been admirably preserved, and we are left with little excuse for any failure in comprehension. The great notes of the Gospel are plainly struck, decisively sounded. There are no awkward chords, no complicated variations.

But it is perhaps just because of this fact that I emerge at the end with a certain uneasiness. It is all just a little too simple and too clear-cut. Dr. Brunner is far more immediately intelligible than St. Paul. This is a strength of the commentary. Is it also its weakness? It displays all the qualities that have made the work of its author so congenial to the Anglo-Saxon mind. But this may point to a failure in depth. In the early chapters we find the usual "common-sense" attitude to and exposition of the pagan knowledge of God. When we reach the issue of predestination, all mystery seems to vanish—however much Dr. Brunner may assure us that it remains illogical to the end. The great paradox of love and wrath is "ironed out" in a few sentences of consummate skill.

It may be that all this is more than a little unfair. Certainly the significant word must be one of profound gratitude for so many treasures so persuasively offered. Yet those who set the exposition of a passage such as chapter five over against that offered by Karl Barth will, I think, discern a difference that is more than one of style.

The Christian doctrine of providence has not, of recent years, been an overworked theme; and the minister, scanning his shelves for illumination, may well find no helpful contribution since the

² *The Letter to the Romans*, by Emil Brunner. Lutterworth Press. 21/-, 1959.

classic discussion provided by H. H. Farmer in *The World and God*. Yet just here are concentrated some of the most intractable and perplexing problems that confront us in the daily life of faith; and one way or another, we are bound to take up a position. Perhaps it is partly due to the dearth of clear and incisive thinking on this issue that Christian congregations cling to so many sub-Christian attitudes and reactions at this point. In any event, those ministers who are aware of the desperate need for relevant instruction and education will welcome a book that grapples constructively with so central a concern.³

It must be emphasized that we are not offered a systematic exposition and attack. Nor are the questions asked necessarily those that would immediately leap to mind. The approach is many-sided. The advance is achieved by way of constant probing, now on this flank, now on that. Nevertheless, to treat of fate, destiny, and freedom, of time and eternity, of tragedy, technics, and prayer, is to attempt a coverage both revelant and satisfying.

This is a characteristically American examination. It never moves far from the contemporary situation. It always takes seriously the secular diagnoses of our time. Yet it remains profoundly biblical and christocentric, never abandons the perspective of faith, ever holds fast to the truths of deepest experience. No simple, easy answers are provided to our queries. Rather are we shown the proper way of rephrasing the questions, and led compassionately to the point of vantage from which we can begin to discern the nature of the answers.

I found the discussion strongest when grappling with destiny and freedom, time and eternity, and most salutary when defending the validity and reality of the tragic and the fateful. We are offered no theological *leger-de-main*, and no *deus ex machina* either. And for these mercies we should be profoundly grateful. But we are constantly reminded that what we are confronting are not inert, obstructive problems to be solved by the application of proper technique, but living mysteries of which we are a part, and which, rationally explored, may reveal themselves as ultimately friendly. To understand this is to begin to discern the truth of our author's dictum that in the end the doctrine of providence is only a kind of theological praise.

It is such an understanding of providence that links it so closely with Christian prayer; and perhaps it is in the practice of prayer that the average Christian believer reaches his most accurate and adequate understanding of the divine overruling. Furthermore, there is a sense in which all the great themes of Christian faith and experience have about them a certain timeless quality; and prayer itself is no exception in its basic independence of changing times

³ *Providence*, by Roger Hazelton. S.C.M. Press, Ltd. 15/-. 1958.

and seasons. That is why the great classics of the spiritual quest still speak to us with power, and still preserve their effectiveness long centuries after they were written. The nature of God and the need of man are constants, and the road to fellowship between them does not change with the passing years.

All this is certainly true. Yet it is not to be denied that we are creatures rooted in earth, affected by the pressures of our own age, moulded by the *Zeitgeist*. Am I wrong in finding just here the reason why so many of the books on prayer, whether of yesterday or of today, fail in the end to speak to my condition, and carry with them a musty smell, a certain remoteness from contemporary living? Their lack is not profundity but relatedness and relevance.

So it is that this fresh study⁴ is to be acclaimed with more than usual thankfulness. The author is at home in the spiritual world. He is also no stranger to the common ways of twentieth century life. He can effectively direct a two-way traffic. He understands the problems of a scientific age, and has learned from literature to comprehend the modern scene. If he deals with the old themes, yet he never fails to make them come alive. Perhaps it is because he has so strong an understanding that God is neither the God of the gaps in our knowledge nor the God of redemption only. He is Creator, Sustainer, Lord of the world.

There is nothing elementary about this book. It demands thought, study, and mental effort. But there is nothing falsely academic about it either. When its teaching has been assimilated, a guide to practical prayer is in our hands. Would that the writer had given us the fruit of his own thinking on that crucial problem, the relationship between corporate and individual devotion! Would that he had also grounded his exposition in the central realities of Christian faith and Christian revelation! For if the understanding and the practice of prayer are to be truly Christian, then the great truths—God in Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Church—must be made normative, directive and controlling. It is here that Mr. Magee stumbles. Because of this a great study fails to achieve highest rank.

Many in our time will be found viewing the Church of Scotland with affection, admiration, and esteem; and some of these at least watch the progress of her conversations with the Church of England with mingled anxiety and hope. In such a situation, it was inevitable that her scholars should delve more deeply into the ecclesiological treasures she may have to present and to preserve. A volume⁵ that traces fully the historical roots of the Reformed

⁴ *Reality and Prayer*, by John Magee. Hodder & Stoughton, Ltd. 12/6d. 1958.

⁵ *Corpus Christi*, by Geddes MacGregor. Macmillan & Co. Ltd. 30/- 1959.

Church in Scotland and explicates her understanding of Church, Ministry, and Sacraments will be assured of careful study and attention.

The historical discussion is especially valuable in its examination of the mediaeval period; for it is only against such a background that Reformation controversies can rightly be interpreted. The importance of the Conciliar Movement is clearly shown, and the legalistic framework of so much of the ecclesiological exposition is amply demonstrated. If there is defect here, it is of a kind that characterizes the study as a whole. There is a certain unevenness of treatment, a certain loss of cohesion, a certain lack of organization—as though, at times, the material itself has taken control and escaped the governing hand.

But the reader will move on expectantly to the more explicitly theological section. Nor will he be disappointed. We are given an exposition of the phrase “the Body of Christ” which is notable for sanity and balance. We are reminded of the importance of the Reformed addition of “the exercise of discipline” to the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments. We are offered the now familiar conception of *episcopē* in terms of ministry held *in solidum*. Those who sit close to the Separatist tradition will welcome the many references to it, and will—we may hope—attend to the criticisms passed upon it. And Baptists, disappointed by a meagre and threadbare defence of infant baptism in terms of the Covenant will note the author’s earlier admission that “covenant theology” is largely a seventeenth century product.

Dr. MacGregor clearly discerns the importance of the past for the understanding of the present; and English Free Churchmen should welcome a book⁶ that directs them back to their roots. The publishers have placed us all in their debt by reissuing this pre-war volume in the valuable series of Harper Torchbooks. Here is provided, with an amazing wealth of detailed documentation, the thrilling story of one important aspect of the history of the turbulent years, 1570-1643. These are the formative years of the Puritan movement. To enter into them deeply is to begin to understand the crucial significance of this new manifestation of Christian faith and life.

Haller’s concern is with the preacher and the pamphleteer. It is a wise pre-occupation. For the significance of press and pulpit in this era would be difficult to overestimate. Sermons were no new things; and the Puritan preachers stood formally in the succession of their mediaeval predecessors. But from their bastion and fortress at Cambridge University emerged an unending stream of educated and godly divines, to command pulpits and lectureships and chap-

⁶ *The Rise of Puritanism*, by William Haller. Harper & Brothers. 15/-. 1957.

laincies at England's religious heart. With plain speech they fired the people. In homely but biblical imagery they reinterpreted the drama of man's salvation and plotted the course to New Jerusalem.

By itself, the force of this onslaught might have proved irresistible. But it did not stand alone. To the spoken was added the written word; and this was something that other ages had not known. From the press poured forth the manifestos of the new gospel. Religious disputation jostled spiritual autobiography. Learned treatise mingled with pithy instruction.

But events were to show that the Cambridge preachers had unleashed a whirlwind they could not control. In the early years of Charles I, the succession was failing. The repressive measures of Archbishop Laud served only to shift the focal point of the ensuing conflict. Radicals and separatists moved into the centre of the stage, re-applying the teaching of their mentors in ways of which the early Puritans had never dreamed. Gradualism gave place to "reformation without tarrying for anie." With the Civil War, events took command.

Baptists may well find here a more accurate understanding of their origins. No group, in this period, is rightly studied in isolation. If new religious waves were constantly breaking upon the battered shores of seventeenth-century England, beneath them all was the mighty ground-swell which the Puritan preachers and pamphleteers did so much to create.

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