

## In The Study

SEVEN years ago there appeared a study of the substitutionary character of Calvin's doctrine of reconciliation which, by reason of its critical, perceptive and constructive delineation, marked out its author as a man to be watched. The early promise has been fulfilled. In a recent volume in the Library of Philosophy and Theology, he has afforded us a seminal work<sup>1</sup> that should preoccupy Christian scholars for many a long day.

We are familiar with the post-war attempt to restate the Gospel in terms that will be meaningful to modern man. In this context Bultmann is still the figure to be reckoned with, as he labours to do justice to the uniqueness of Christianity whilst expressing its content in the philosophical categories of Heideggerian existentialism. There is the tendency in this country to write him off far too quickly, and we may rightly be on our guard against those who lightly dismiss him with naive criticisms that have learned nothing from John Macquarrie's discerning evaluations and with facile generalisations about the post-Bultmannian era. Nevertheless, it may fairly be agreed that the existentialist restatement suffers from a crucial failure to do justice on the one hand to the corporate and cosmic dimensions of the Christian faith and on the other to the true situation of modern thought and modern man. There is need for a new approach and a fresh line of enquiry.

Hence the appeal of Bonhoeffer, whose fragmentary hints provide a passable base for wild forays in almost any direction. But hence also the growing sense that the philosophical movement of linguistic analysis may provide, in the Anglo-Saxon world at least, a better clue to the contemporary intellectual dilemma and a more relevant tool for dealing with it. Enter then Dr. Paul van Buren—armed with Bonhoeffer, logical empiricism, and a determination to do justice both to the Gospel and to twentieth-century man.

The progression of the argument may be briefly sketched. An examination of classical christology as it comes to focus at Chalcedon is offered, and a reinterpretation in terms of "call and response" is suggested as doing justice in our day to the intention both of Scripture and of the Fathers. The existentialist construction of Bultmann and Ogden is carefully weighed, and rejected on the grounds that it neither preserves the centrality of the historic Jesus nor abides the valid questions of the empiricist philosopher. Con-

<sup>1</sup> Paul van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, S.C.M., 25s. 1963.

ventional theological language is pulled to pieces under the ruthless hands of linguistic analysis, and an alternative significant presentation attempted. From this new position Dr. van Buren moves in the remainder of the book to consider what may and must be said of the history of Jesus, the Easter message, and key doctrines of Christian theology.

It is a secular interpretation of the Christian faith that van Buren seeks to provide. He accepts Wittgenstein's thesis that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language." He agrees with Hare that Christian faith depends upon a "blik," a presupposition about the world, an orientation that involves seeing things in a particular way, a perspective involving a commitment. He substantially follows Ian Ramsey in his analysis of the language of faith and his concern with situations of disclosure and discernment. The "blik" of the Christian is his historical perspective, a universal perspective which takes the history Jesus and the event of Easter as normative. It is a perspective which imposes itself upon the believer.

Here there is no flight from historical reality. Faith is based on Jesus of Nazareth, a historical figure, whose central characteristic was his freedom for men; yet always and only on Jesus as Christ and Lord, on the One whose contagious freedom grasped disciples in the Easter experience and continues to grasp men still. So is safeguarded the true objectivity of the Gospel, and thus is powerfully set forth the primacy and centrality of Christology.

What then shall we say to these things? We have to ask first whether this can really get by the linguistic philosophers, and that is not an easy question to answer. Certainly Dr. van Buren has disposed of metaphysics, and that should win him a good many votes. But he leans heavily on Hare's "blik" and disposes perhaps a little too quickly and slickly of Antony Flew's rejoinder. Some serious attention to Ronald Hepburn might have been in order at this point. Nevertheless, this is impressive grappling with issues of thought and language which are still widely ignored.

But what of the theologians? That is the second question. The instinctive reaction is to level the charge of reductionism, to suggest that theology has been translated into ethics without visible remainder. But this would not be entirely fair. Reference to the transcendent has been eliminated, a cognitive conception of faith has been discarded, but the kerygmatic foundation of the Christian way of life stands firm. This is a tremendously challenging attempt to present a "secular" Christianity, that is, to provide an empirical grounding for the language of faith and an interpretation of the Gospel as an expression of a historical perspective. It is fatally easy to miss the whole point, levelling meaningless criticisms from within quite another universe of discourse and understanding.

Yet I think there is a critical question mark that has to be put at

the end of this fascinating study. It is widely held that the rock on which we must build is not theology but Christology. I think this is true. Yet I cannot avoid the harsh conclusion that so often this ends up with a Marcionite use of Scripture, an abandonment of the cosmic dimensions of biblical faith, and the reduction of everything to anthropology and ethics. Is it the method that is at fault? Or is it the Christology that is wrong? I return uneasily to one sentence of Van Buren. "If the Logos, which is God, has really been made flesh, as orthodox theology has maintained, then we have no need to speak about anything other than this 'flesh' which dwelt among us." No need to *speak* about anything other—perhaps not. But is this all that is being *implied*? Orthodox theology never of course suggested that the Logos was transmuted into flesh. It claimed that the Logos took humanity to Himself. There is a reference beyond the brute *datum*, the revelation which is the historic Jesus. And then we are not far from the re-entrance of God, the ghost of natural theology may once more be knocking at the door, and metaphysics may be gesturing and grimacing at the window. A daunting prospect indeed! But the wise man may want to live with it a little longer before deciding that these potent spectres must finally be banished.

It is more than ten years since the production of a symposium entitled *Christian Faith and Social Action*, to which Paul Lehmann was one of the contributors. The approach to and understanding of Christian ethics which he there outlined is now presented in developed form.<sup>2</sup> It has taken a long time. But it has proved to have been worth the waiting.

Philosophical ethics and moral theology are subjected to searching examination and found wanting. Yet the enquiry at these points is of abiding value and importance, for the assessment is shrewd and perceptive. But the building of his own constructive position is Lehmann's major preoccupation, and upon this interest will inevitably concentrate. Christian ethics is seen to be a theological discipline. It is the attempt to wrestle with a basic question and to supply its answer. That question is: "What am I, as a believer in Jesus Christ and as a member of his church to do?" It is to be noticed that ethics is thus a community activity; it has a *koinonia* character, for the church has an ethical significance. How can this be? Because the aim of a Christian ethic is not morality but maturity, and the church is set within the world as that community wherein maturity is in process of achievement. But still the question must be pressed: What am I to do? The answer is: the will of God, understood neither as cliché nor as crippling demand. The will of God is in fact what the living God is actively accomplishing in the world of his creation to bring mankind to maturity. His activity is

<sup>2</sup> Paul Lehmann, *Ethics in a Christian Context*. S.C.M., 35s. 1963.

thus "political" activity. Once this is grasped we are driven to put the accent on a theology of messianism, by which is meant a theology which centres upon "what God has done and is doing in the world to keep human life human." Such a concern involves particular attention being paid to a christology that stresses the three-fold office of Christ as prophet, priest and king. The response to God's humanising activity is man's free obedience, his ethical action. At this point conscience becomes pivotal. But it also becomes truly an ethical reality because at last a living context has been provided for it.

Such a summary is, of course, totally inadequate to reproduce the power and coherence of Lehmann's construction. But as the book is closed certain reactions seem inescapable and certain problems remain. One of the few really significant works in this field during the last fifteen years is Paul Ramsey's *Basic Christian Ethics*. Here the genetic approach was adopted, and the movement was directly and deductively from Scripture. Lehmann stands with Brunner and Reinhold Niebuhr on the other side of a crucial divide. His approach is systematic not genetic, and in sympathy he is perhaps closest to Barth and to Bonhoeffer. In this decisive choice he is surely right. To appreciate the real tension between biblical and Christian ethics is to understand that we must begin not with the New Testament but with ethics as a theological discipline, and proceed to a continuing conversation between the "now" and the "then."

A second critical choice here made is between an absolute and a contextual ethic. Are there principles that can be laid down regardless of situation and circumstance? If so, then we must go on to bridge the gap between the general principle and the particular ethical action. This will mean casuistry, or middle axioms, or proximate norms. Lehmann's verdict is negative. Since we are concerned with God's activity, and with maturity rather than morality, an ethic of context is inevitably what remains to us. And then sensitivity, perception, imagination play a more significant role than purely logical thinking. Again, this is surely right. But there remain an uneasy vagueness and inconclusiveness as we seek the content of ethical activity. A subsequent volume which works out in more practical manner the implications of the foundations already laid seems to be projected. It may be that this will silence the doubts.

But perhaps the issue is as usual and at last a theological one. It may be raised in this way. There is a long and hallowed tradition which bases ethics on theological anthropology, and which will often move from creation to redemption, from Law to Gospel. Lehmann, on the contrary, starts from the Trinitarian God, builds on a firm christological base, and works from the perspective of redemption. Again we must stand with him. But the God for whom

redemption is no afterthought, no unrelated emergency plan, is the consistent God who sustains the world according to order and who provides structure within which alone humanity is to be achieved. May it not be that to give this due weight would be in the end to provide the structured content which here seems somehow to be lacking. We need a creative ethic, an ethic of obedience, an ethic of context, an ethic of freedom. But freedom in a vacuum is the road to a new slavery. If we must choose between history and nature as the key to God's self-revelation, then with Lehmann we must choose history, and in any event give it the controlling place. But I am not convinced that it is a straight either-or.

I ought to go on to present Wendel's study of Calvin and his theology—the best thing of its kind in English, to be set side by side with Wilhelm Niesel's earlier work—and to commend J. N. D. Kelly's commentary on the Pastoral Epistles, which at last sees continental respect for Pauline authorship taken seriously, is a model of what an expository commentary should be, and takes its place with Johnson's Mark and Barrett's Romans as the best of the Black series. I ought to, I intended to. But I have been captivated and lured away by a booklet<sup>3</sup> which is of domestic interest and has the initial merit of a price within range of the minister's pocket. Prepared under the auspices of the Baptist Revival Fellowship by some of its members, it presents New Testament teaching on the relationship between local churches, surveys historical developments in Baptist polity, and outlines present denominational trends, theological, ecumenical, administrative, liturgical. It is a trumpet call bidding the garrison awake before the Trojan Horse captures the keep.

Conservative evangelicals are worried. They do well to be worried. Anyone with an ounce of vision ought to be worried with them. Events move on; and we race after them, spinning our theological justifications as we pant in pursuit. Conservative voices are largely ignored, treated as obstructive, and reproachfully accused of breaking the fellowship, or alternatively of rocking the boat. There is a subtle touch of *de haut en bas* about the whole unpleasant business.

Of course, they themselves, are heavily to blame. For too long too many have shrilly cried "heresy" while betraying most of the symptoms of theological illiteracy. Truly to converse means a theological confrontation, and that in turn involves hard work. The significance of this booklet is that it suggests that this realisation is dawning. At last it is recognised that church order may turn out to be a question of embodiment of the Gospel. At last denunciation is giving way to argument. At last something like a coherent case is

<sup>3</sup> Baptist Revival Fellowship production, *Liberty in the Lord*. Carey Kingsgate Press, 1s. 6d. 1964.

being presented. It is at least a decade late. Let us hope it is not too late.

The New Testament section is good sound sense as far as it goes. It raises two fundamental problems. The first is its failure to take Scripture seriously. It asserts: "It is the conviction of this paper that the New Testament is our sole and sufficient authority in all matters of faith and conduct. . . ." I would imagine that classic Christianity would want at this point to substitute the whole Bible for the New Testament. I would certainly hope so. Now, of course, once this substitution is made matters become far more complicated. You cannot "read off" from the whole Bible with quite the consummate simplicity that restricted attention to the New Testament might suggest. That irritating problem of hermeneutics rears its head. It makes things all very difficult. But perhaps truth is like that. The second problem is a closely associated one. The most illuminating thing that could happen now would be for the B.R.F. to have a public debate with the majority of conservative evangelicals. For the interesting thing is that two groups of conservatives, working from the same dogmas about Scripture, christology, atonement, come up with quite different doctrinal conclusions about church order (not to say baptism). Perhaps Scripture is not that simple after all. However, from the chapter conclusions let us hope that none will dissent. "Inter-church control is absent from the *practice* of the New Testament churches." And in terms of New Testament *principles*, "each local church is a microcosm of the whole church." Yes, indeed.

The historical section is in itself a valuable excursus. "Helwys would have been astonished at any suggestion that a group of churches, by covenanting together, could become a 'church'." I share his astonishment. "It is also readily apparent that his doctrine of the church is marked off from all theories about the church which make it dependent for its existence on ministerial order." Yea, verily! "If the inter-communion of churches was sought it was on the basis of doctrine, not at the expense of it." Amen to that! "The distinction between 'declarative' and 'legislative' authority is particularly relevant for contemporary discussion, for if it is not upheld, an instrument of ecclesiastical tyranny may be created." A salutary warning! One query only. One of the important italicised sentences reads: "Thus association with, or integration into, a group of churches does not make the local church any more a church than it is already." This is unfortunately put. It is right in what it asserts, but wrong in what it implies. A local church which is not in association with a group of churches could not (except in extraordinary circumstances) claim to be a true local church at all.

The final chapter is likely to command most attention. It mis-

understands *The Pattern of the Church*—though for this it may be excused and in this it is in diverse and good company. Let us hope that it is right in finding in that volume “an integrated position.” But it is certainly wrong in thinking that its theology is basically “incarnational.” Its foundation is, in fact, christological; and its pivot is, in fact, the Cross and Resurrection—if we must segment in this unfortunate fashion. No happier is the catena of terse, unsubstantiated assertions that follows. Religio-philosophical concepts substituted for the objective saving acts of God in Christ, justification by grace through faith thrown overboard, baptismal incorporation undermining *sola fide* and *sola gratia* (did St. Paul ever realise his inconsistency?) Oh dear, oh dear. A long way to go yet—for all of us.

But let us not worry too much about all this. There are many important things wisely said. “The Baptist Union already contains an embryonic bureaucracy which is in a position to assume greater powers if the movement towards centralization gains strength in the denomination at large.” Too true. Indeed herein is focused one of our characteristic Western aberrations. We so instinctively think of the bonds of the Church in juridical terms. In our present situation the freedom of the local church is probably the most significant reality that remains as safeguard to the authority of Christ and the Gospel. Events are pushing us towards centralisation; and this is profoundly dangerous. Unless the theological spadework is done at depth and done quickly, it is difficult to view the future with anything but alarm. We must be grateful for the B.R.F. extended comment. It attempts, however falteringly and inadequately, to think theologically, to criticise theologically, and to raise the theological issues that need to be raised. With its final pages of conclusions and suggestions I am almost wholly in agreement. One of them at least is perhaps a trifle optimistic. “We suggest that the Baptist Union officers immediately initiate discussions between those whose viewpoint is represented in this Report and those of the other theological viewpoints in the denomination.” A good try! But why pick on the “officers”? Is this not more broadly a Baptist Union matter?

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