

# IS THEOLOGY A SCIENCE?

by ALAN S. DUTHIE

**D**R. DUTHIE, a graduate of the Universities of St. Andrews and Manchester, is now Lecturer in Linguistics in the University of Ghana. In the following paper, which was originally delivered to a Scottish Conference of the Tyndale Fellowship, he considers the nature of theology from the standpoint of modern linguistic science.

## I

**W**HEN we hear a sentence in a language we have never learnt, no communication at all will be received. If we have learnt the language and recognize all the words in the sentence, communication will take place, but at least slight distortion will arise from every dimension of difference between hearer and speaker.<sup>1</sup> The greater and more numerous<sup>2</sup> these dimensions of difference, the greater the distortion of any communication received. Connotations of a word intended by the speaker pass unnoticed, and connotations not intended at all are added by the hearer.<sup>3</sup> Often these differences are not noted at all;<sup>4</sup> sometimes they are noted with amusement<sup>5</sup> or with irritation;<sup>6</sup> and sometimes, just because they are not noted, serious failure of communication can result.<sup>7</sup>

When a communication is important enough<sup>8</sup> to require its undistorted reception, we must discover the speaker's definition of each term he uses; that is, which features of the general situation are criterial for his use of it,<sup>9</sup> and which not.<sup>10</sup> This is easily done for concrete terms;<sup>11</sup> but the more abstract the term, the more difficult it becomes.<sup>12</sup> Of course, any term could be used with any definition, provided the definition is maintained throughout the

<sup>1</sup> E.g., time, distance, race, temperament, nationality, education, culture, wealth, age, sex.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., (at one extreme), between us and a Chinese emperor of A.D. 500; (at the other) between a husband and wife.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., "transistor" to an electrical engineer has connotations of valves, circuits, and current; to a layman only of music, cricket and camera.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., in above case in casual conversation.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., "pots" meaning "pans" or "dishes" in different areas.

<sup>6</sup> E.g., "aggravate" meaning "annoy".

<sup>7</sup> E.g., "democracy" in East-West debate.

<sup>8</sup> E.g., something on which one's whole life is based.

<sup>9</sup> E.g., (for "table") object with legs and hard flat top.

<sup>10</sup> E.g., material, colour or number of legs.

<sup>11</sup> E.g., "table".

<sup>12</sup> E.g., room, court, government, justice, love.

communication.<sup>13</sup> But there will be greater likelihood of agreement on a definition, and the communication will be of greater real value, only if the definition is correlated with observation of actual features of the general situation.<sup>14</sup> This is logically the beginning of the scientific method. A whole system of interlocking definitions, correlated with situational features of similar type, is called a science.<sup>15</sup>

## II

Communication on the general subject of "relations between God and man" is specially subject to distortion, because of the constant use of very abstract terms.<sup>16</sup> Although this can as usual be remedied by defining terms, it is quite unlikely either that agreement on a definition will be reached,<sup>17</sup> or that an agreed definition<sup>18</sup> will bear any relation to actual reality, just because part of the data itself (namely, God) is not directly accessible to human observation, on account of the finite and sinful nature of the observer. The only reliable observations of these data can therefore be made by God only, if by anyone. Now, although it is not primarily a matter of reason, but of faith, it is at least not unreasonable, to take the Bible as the required complete set of observations of the relations between God and man. It is made comprehensible to man by its being written by man, as well as being inspired by God.

For this communication to be received undistorted, we must try to eliminate the distortions, arising from the considerable differences in race, culture, time, and above all in language between the writers and us.<sup>19</sup> The difference in time is responsible for our not possessing the original manuscripts of the writers, and thus for having to choose between the different readings of the extant manuscripts.<sup>20</sup> We must also appreciate that the Bible was originally written not in English,<sup>21</sup> but in Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic; this necessitates a knowledge of how the latter languages work grammatically. All

<sup>13</sup> As though, e.g., it were agreed to adopt the definitions: "money"= something to eat out of; "love"=every feeling of attraction between the sexes.

<sup>14</sup> E.g., in the case of "table" above.

<sup>15</sup> E.g., of chemistry, linguistics, botany.

<sup>16</sup> E.g., God, faith, love.

<sup>17</sup> E.g., of baptism.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., of holiness.

<sup>19</sup> They were mainly Jews, of various types of education, of 2/3,000 years ago.

<sup>20</sup> E.g., those documents called "P46, A, B, Ea, Eb", etc.

<sup>21</sup> I.e., we are not to seek doctrines of "love", but rather of *agapē*, *philia*, *erōs*, *'ahabhaḥ*, *hesed*, etc.

this, however, is only a matter of settling what the observations are, not yet their mutual interrelation, nor their correlation with the general situation.

### III

In order to receive this communication as undistorted as possible, we have to find out for ourselves the definition of each term used, as the writers neither give their own definitions,<sup>22</sup> nor of course can we ask them for them. The only way of our doing this, as with any science's observations, is to notice all<sup>23</sup> the recurrences of the same item or word,<sup>24</sup> together with the features of its grammatical environment on each occurrence.<sup>25</sup> The same can be done for word-groups or phrases.<sup>26</sup> After the examination of each occurrence, generalizations can be made of those items occurring in each possible grammatical relation to the item in question.<sup>27</sup> After this, a hypothesis can be set up as to the definition of the item in these terms. When the same procedure is applied to several items of related reference,<sup>28</sup> a wider hypothesis can then be set up covering the interrelation of all these items.<sup>29</sup> Derived from all these will come the whole theory of this science of theology.

Then, and only then, can we begin to look for further evidence among the observations.<sup>30</sup> We can then take wider contexts than the immediate grammatical environments we took before.<sup>31</sup> Also, through the Septuagint Greek translation of the O.T.,<sup>32</sup> and through any direct quotations of the O.T. in the N.T.,<sup>33</sup> we can carry our study across from one testament to the other. We can further refer to more or less explicit cross-references from one passage of Scripture to another.<sup>34</sup> All this additional evidence will fill out the bare

<sup>22</sup> Except, e.g., of faith in Heb. 11: 1.

<sup>23</sup> But in *TWNT*, only a few of the "theological" uses of a word may be noticed.

<sup>24</sup> E.g., *ekklēsia* in N.T.

<sup>25</sup> E.g., its subjects, objects, verbs, adjectives, etc.

<sup>26</sup> E.g., *ekklēsia tou theou*.

<sup>27</sup> E.g., with adjective *hagios*; object of *agapaō*, with genitive *theou* and *Galatōn*; not with genitive *Galatias*.

<sup>28</sup> E.g., *Christos, hagioi, presbyteroi*.

<sup>29</sup> E.g., referring to the corporate life of Christians.

<sup>30</sup> I.e., the Bible.

<sup>31</sup> E.g., a sentence or paragraph, like Eph. 5: 21-33.

<sup>32</sup> E.g., we can examine all occurrences of *qahal*, which is sometimes in LXX translated *ekklēsia*.

<sup>33</sup> E.g., Heb. 2: 12.

<sup>34</sup> E.g., to deacons in Acts 6: 1-6 (though not named).

bones of the theory, as it were,<sup>35</sup> with sinews and flesh; but logically these must come after the bones themselves.<sup>36</sup>

#### IV

For theology to be called a science, it must have three more characteristics: verifiability, repeatability, and predictive power. It must be verifiable, by checking after making a generalization all the relevant observations; and similarly after hypotheses and the theory; to see that everything relevant has been taken into account,<sup>37</sup> and nothing irrelevant;<sup>38</sup> that each statement is fully necessitated by the evidence;<sup>39</sup> and is neither too narrow<sup>40</sup> nor too wide.<sup>41</sup> It will also be to some extent (especially to Christians) verifiable in the sense of verifying the observations with the data.<sup>42</sup> Thus, where discrepancies arise, modification will follow only the former type of verification.

All theology's operations must be fully repeatable from generalizations to theory at any time by anyone<sup>43</sup> competent<sup>44</sup> with the same results and no disagreement.<sup>45</sup> Disagreement can arise only from an inaccurate theory, or from failure to agree that the Bible is the only set of observations for this science.<sup>46</sup>

Theology must also be able to predict; i.e., the theory must be able to produce highly probable statements regarding new data from which the theory was not directly made.<sup>47</sup> These data will necessarily differ from the original data in time and in other ways, but must have some similarity. It will be possible to predict about any features of the present situation<sup>48</sup> what they should look like,<sup>49</sup> what will happen if one thing is done or not done,<sup>50</sup> what modifica-

<sup>35</sup> I.e., from a purely linguistic statement.

<sup>36</sup> E.g., Mt. 18: 20 cannot be *first* taken as a definition of the church; but it may help later.

<sup>37</sup> Contrast credal statements, which omit everything non-controversial.

<sup>38</sup> E.g., Jesus and children in regard to baptism.

<sup>39</sup> Not just capable of being justified; e.g., a term like "God the Son".

<sup>40</sup> I.e., a purely grammatical statement of *ekklesia*.

<sup>41</sup> E.g., Mt. 18: 20 as primary evidence.

<sup>42</sup> E.g., some present-day "churches" fit the Bible pattern better than others.

<sup>43</sup> Many *TWNT* writers do work which is not repeatable by anyone not of the "Biblical Theology" school.

<sup>44</sup> I.e., trained in the relevant languages and methods.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. physicists' constant agreement, except at the frontiers of the science.

<sup>46</sup> The latter may require a drastic spiritual cure.

<sup>47</sup> E.g., the present time.

<sup>48</sup> E.g., churches.

<sup>49</sup> E.g., company of saints, not "religious buildings".

<sup>50</sup> E.g., if there is a lack of love; or a meeting for prayer.

tions should be made,<sup>51</sup> what relation any feature of the general situation should have with other features.<sup>52</sup>

## V

Compared with other sciences, this science has certain uniquenesses which necessarily derive from the very nature of the data. But, as a science properly is based directly not on data, but on observations,<sup>53</sup> this does not disqualify theology from being a science. The uniquenesses are : that the observations are not fully verifiable by the observer with the data ; they come not from the observer, but from an outside source ; they are necessarily accurate as they are presented ; they are also complete, in that all that is needed is there and no further observations can be made with any validity ;<sup>54</sup> and they are presented in an order which is significant.

From these uniquenesses comes a further uniqueness, that of the completeness and certainty of the theory. For this reason, some may prefer to call such a theory a law.<sup>55</sup> On the other hand, the nature of the data and the observations also demands that the theory contain certain gaps and inconsistencies, as they might appear from the point of view of human logic.<sup>56</sup> Actual varieties of interpretation will either be excluded, if ill-founded ;<sup>57</sup> or otherwise incorporated in the theory.<sup>58</sup>

## VI

Some theologians may claim to be doing this sort of work already ; but this is very doubtful.<sup>59</sup> In any case it is always valuable to state the theory behind any scientific work, so that it becomes easier for everyone to see the reasons for right beliefs, and what exactly is wrong with wrong beliefs, and how they should be modified. It is also valuable in facilitating the integration of many excellent pieces of work and ideas, which already exist,

<sup>51</sup> E.g., to make more evident the Lordship of Christ.

<sup>52</sup> E.g., "churches" with "elders" or "believers".

<sup>53</sup> E.g., chemistry, anatomy, physiology, anthropology, may all derive from the same data, man ; but differ in the observations made from the data.

<sup>54</sup> See p. 4, lines 8 ff., for reasons.

<sup>55</sup> This, of course, has nothing to do with the Biblical term "law".

<sup>56</sup> E.g., the apparent conflict between the texts quoted in support of extreme Calvinism or Arminianism ; cf. also "the Word was with God and the Word was God".

<sup>57</sup> E.g., one of the common views of baptism.

<sup>58</sup> E.g., Rom. 3: 28 and Jas. 2: 24: "justified by faith apart from works" and "justified by works and not by faith alone".

<sup>59</sup> Much work aims merely to justify the holding of some doctrine by some body of Christians.

though isolated,<sup>60</sup> into a whole, coherent system, derived from the whole Bible. The Bible can then be read by non-native speakers of its original languages (i.e., anyone at the present time) with greater comprehension, either in the originals, or in a more adequate translation than presently available.<sup>61</sup> Clearly, very few if any can actually perform all the operations described, from first to last ; but it is very important for every individual to realize what needs to be done,<sup>62</sup> what he can do himself,<sup>63</sup> what he cannot do,<sup>64</sup> what other work he is taking for granted,<sup>65</sup> and how reliable this is likely to be.<sup>66</sup>

As we can gather from the examples and from our own experience, much theological activity cannot be called science,<sup>67</sup> in the sense defined here which is more or less the definition accepted among scientists. It has however been shown that theology can be derived in exactly the same way as any other science is, given the special nature of the data. Such theology should benefit every Christian, especially in this age when everything non-scientific is suspect. However, it will in no way obviate the need for the Holy Spirit's work in dispensing the Word of God to each church and each Christian,<sup>68</sup> according to what their individual circumstances require at different times.

*University of Ghana.*

<sup>60</sup> E.g., studies in someone's field or book of special interest.

<sup>61</sup> The best so far is the Revised Standard Version.

<sup>62</sup> I.e., roughly what is outlined above.

<sup>63</sup> E.g., work from an English translation.

<sup>64</sup> E.g., a study of the difference between *'edah* and *qahal*.

<sup>65</sup> E.g., some English translation.

<sup>66</sup> Based on the information he can get from those competent to evaluate such work.

<sup>67</sup> But rather a branch of speculative philosophy, whether with Christian intentions or not.

<sup>68</sup> E.g., through prayer, the reading of the Bible in public or in private, preaching, etc.