

*THE THEOLOGICAL USE OF THE NEW
TESTAMENT.*

AN INAUGURAL LECTURE.

It is my first duty—and the duty is a pleasure—to acknowledge the catholicity of spirit which has prompted the authorities of this college to entrust a Scotchman and a Presbyterian with the work of the Yates chair of New Testament Greek and Exegesis. At the opening of the College Dr. Fairbairn claimed that “though created by the Independent or Congregational churches, it has been created in no sectional spirit.” My appointment is a fresh proof that this principle continues to determine the policy of those who are responsible for the organisation of Mansfield; I am sensible of their generosity, and I feel bound at the outset to explain that although I come to you from different academic and ecclesiastical traditions, I shall endeavour to serve the college and the churches loyally in those interests of scholarship and religion which are dear and common to us all.

“New Testament Greek” is a convenient rather than an accurate term for the scope of this chair. Our newer knowledge of the *κοινή* has dispelled the notion that the New Testament writers used a special dialect and vocabulary of their own, instead of the Hellenistic vernacular. Besides, the exegesis of these writers takes us back into an age when there was no New Testament. The collective religious authority of the New Testament flows from the rise of the canon, which belongs to the later history of the church and of dogma. Historical exegesis, with its obligation to avoid dogmatic presuppositions or practical considerations in handling the texts, has to discuss the New Testament docu-

ments as part of the literature thrown up by early Christianity. At the same time, even this scientific treatment brings out the features and qualities of the New Testament writings which led to their selection for the purposes of the canon. It also justifies—I would almost go the length of saying that it demands—what may be called the theological use of the New Testament as a collection of early Christian writings which for the most part embody a religious unity.

The very title suggests this. When we speak of the "New Testament" (*ἡ καινὴ διαθήκη*), the use of *διαθήκη* is different from that, for example, in the title of the "Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs." The New Testament is not the dying counsel of Jesus. In the fifth century "*Testamentum Domini nostri Christi*," the instructions and regulations for church-life are supposed to have been issued by the risen Christ, but even this does not correspond to the sense of "Testament" in the title of the Christian canon; the New Testament contains more than the *ipsissima verba* of the historical Jesus or of the Lord speaking in the Spirit to the prophetic souls of the primitive community. The primary significance of the title is to be found in the fact that the Christian canon was a sequel. It is uncertain when the term "Old Testament" began to be applied by the early Christians to the records which attested the validity of the covenant with Israel and guaranteed its promises. Paul speaks incidentally of "the reading of the Old Testament" (*τῆ ἀναγνώσει τῆς παλαιᾶς διαθήκης*),¹ but his words do not necessarily imply that this was a contemporary title of the Jewish scriptures. Eventually the usage did come into force, and it paved the way for a similar title, as soon as the authoritative collection of Christian writings required a designation. But the title was more than a verbal inference,

¹ 2 Cor. iii. 14.

adopted for the sake of convenience. It served undoubtedly to bring out the contrast or the sequence between the old and the new periods in revelation. Irenaeus, for example, quotes the saying of Jesus about the householder who brought out of his treasure things new and old, and explains that the householder is the Lord, while the things old and new unquestionably mean the Law and the Gospel. But it is essential to recollect that the term *διαθήκη*, as applied either to the Christian religion or to its canonical records, had a larger import. Upon the one hand, like its Hebrew equivalent *bērîth*, in the later stages of the Hebrew literature, it could denote primarily the promise of God by which He binds Himself to His people at any specific epoch in their religious history. "The term *bērîth* had a charm and power, and was clung to, partly because it expressed the most solemn and unalterable assurance on God's part that He would be the people's salvation, and partly, perhaps, because it suggested that He acted with men after the manner of men, graciously engaging Himself to them, and entering into their life."¹ The emphasis, therefore, falls not on mutual obligations so much as on the gracious disposition which determines the attitude of God to men at any historical crisis of religion. Our popular use of "covenant" corresponds to *συνθήκη* rather than to the fundamental notion of *διαθήκη* as a term for the Christian religion, where the notion of compact or agreement is subordinate to that of the divine resolve. Thus Paul prefers to bring out the element of promise and grace in the divine *διαθήκη*, an element which is obscured in an English equivalent of "covenant," and in so doing he conserves what is vital in the conception. But *διαθήκη* was as flexible a term as our modern "will" or "disposition." Associations of will or testament hovered round it in other

Professor A. B. Davidson in *Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. i., p. 514.

quarters, and these, for all their suggestions of formality, helped to deepen the element of decisiveness—an element which, like that of promise, expressed the personal initiative of God in the history of revelation. The Latin equivalent, *testamentum*, at once acquired a vogue in this connexion within the western church, and the connotation of “New Testament” thus arose. Melito of Sardes is the earliest writer who is known to have used the Greek form. We may infer, therefore, that it was coming slowly into circulation, but long after the middle of the second century. By the time of Tertullian, the Latin form was apparently current, though not yet absolute.

Primarily, then, the title was due to the name already assigned to the Jewish canon which had been the Bible of the early church. The “New” Testament suggests at once a religious contrast and a continuity with the “Old.” Christians, it was felt, inherited by a secure title the promises of God which had formed the hope of religion in the past; the death of Jesus was for them a pledge of God’s irrevocable good-will, a proof of His character as the God of love acting freely within history, such as the Old Testament had not been able to furnish.

The title, therefore, had more than the significance of an antithesis. It indicated and vindicated a positive estimate of Christianity as the religion whose *διαθήκη* is embodied in the New Testament writings, and embodied as a divine act of revelation through the person of Jesus Christ. In our popular vocabulary “the Testament” means the Christian scriptures. The trend of religious feeling which has led to this abbreviation was felt almost as soon as the canon arose. In this one way the early Christians concentrated the interests of faith upon the New Testament as *the* Testament, and interpreted the Old Testament by Messianic and allegorical methods as a prediction of the later covenant, when the

divine will became effective through Jesus. The inheritance of religious privilege to which they believed they had fallen heirs was summed up in the new order of sonship which Jesus had inaugurated. It was His person and spirit which were fundamental. Philo, anticipated by at least one writer in the Old Testament,¹ had already interpreted *διαθήκη* as a symbol or rather an embodiment of the sheer grace of God. "There are all sorts of covenants, apportioning graces and gifts to the deserving," he remarks, "but the highest kind of covenant is" God himself.² This tendency to heighten the personal, divine element in *διαθήκη* naturally appealed to the early Christians. Justin, for example, more than once identifies Christ with the new covenant. "What is the covenant of God? Is it not Christ?" "An eternal and perfect law and a faithful covenant is given to us, even Christ."³ This is to read the notion of "covenant" in the light of Christ, not to read Christ in the light of older conceptions of *διαθήκη*, and the New Testament literature, in its deepest reaches, moves under the same impulse. The Christianity it embodies has no guarantee outside what Jesus was and did. It attests a religion which is bound up with the significance of the impression made by His teaching and personality. It implies that the binding force of our religion as a tie to God depends upon His character as expressed by Jesus. And this is what I mean by a theological use of the New Testament—not an identification of the significance of Jesus with the precise doctrinal forms which that assumed in apostolic or post-apostolic thought, not a pious play of fancy upon the title of the New Testament collection, but an approach to the documents, along the avenues of historical and literary criticism, which brings us face to face with the

¹ The author of Isa. xlii. 6.

² *De mutatione nominum*, 6, 8.

³ *Dial.* 122, 10.

decisive place of Jesus for them and for ourselves. We get behind the conception of a New Testament canon. But what we do not get behind is the impression that the New Testament, in spirit as well as in name, is a collection of documents which witness directly to a new and final order of sonship inaugurated by Jesus Christ for men. That witness is conveyed in the record of interaction between experience and reflection. The experience is spontaneous, and so is the reflection, more or less, in its own way. Both lie open to our criticism, but it must be criticism with a sense of perspective and proportion, which does not lose sight of the fact that these documents claim to be the classical texts of a new religion, and of a new religion dominated by the spirit of Christ. This is what furnishes the ultimate criterion for their appreciation, and so enables them to furnish us with the standard and the elements of a theology which is definitely Christian.

Such a theological use of the New Testament is organic to its purpose and structure. The historical method has shown that it is a theological abuse of the New Testament to manipulate proof-texts in support of some later creed or to construct a speculative religious philosophy and then sprinkle it with New Testament phrases. But its work has been constructive as well as critical. By distinguishing the Christian message from the dialect in which it had to be made intelligible for the first Christian century, it has enabled us to recognise afresh that while we are bound to criticise the New Testament writings as theological no less than as literary products, they verify a religion which lives to criticise our later theories as well as our practice of it. This is one of its properties as a reality in the sphere of historical religion. For here as elsewhere reality is not simply what resists the efforts of our clever fingers to treat it as if it were a lump of wax. Reality thrusts itself upon our conventional and

traditional interpretations. It will neither be modernised nor treated as antiquarian. It refuses to be stereotyped. It startles us repeatedly with an unsuspected vitality and range of appeal. The New Testament claims to certify such a reality in the history of religion, and a theological use of the New Testament is successful, not as it is satisfied to discover some adequate formula, ancient or modern, for this divine power of life in the person and spirit of Jesus, but as it enables us by the processes of linguistic research and historical imagination alike to feel intelligently the authentic rush and thrill with which that redeeming reality broke upon the first Christian century and prompted men to think out its supreme significance.

In a word, the very title of the New Testament contains a theology in itself. I do not mean, of course, that research into the religious ideas of the New Testament would justify us in making anything like the later federal theology a norm for the Christian religion. As a matter of fact, the conception of a covenant occurs only once in the extant words of Jesus. It was the conception of the divine kingdom which appealed more to Him, possibly because it had fewer legal associations, possibly because it lay more in line with the eschatological interests of the gospel. But both conceptions were social and redemptive, and ultimately both ran up into the same belief in a new relation between men and God the Father. Consequently, when Jesus spoke of His death at the last Supper as the inauguration of the new covenant, it is probable that this isolated saying means that he was viewing the establishment of the kingdom for once in the light of the older category. Even the presence of the term "new" in the Supper-saying is not beyond the range of controversy, though it is the less likely to be a Pauline addition since the notion of a new covenant cannot be said to have been one of Paul's cardinal religious categories

even in his anti-Judaistic reading of the Old Testament history. It is in Hebrews that the new covenant idea is worked out most explicitly, with an infusion of the testamentary element in connexion with the death of Christ, but it is curious that no allusion is made by the writer to the famous Supper-saying. Irenaeus, the last and indeed (with the exception of Clement) almost the only one of the early fathers to employ the covenant-idea in the philosophy of religious history, develops his view quite independently of Hebrews. So far as I recollect, he never mentions that epistle in this connexion. It was not from the phraseology of the New Testament writings, therefore, that the early church applied the title of "New Testament" to its canon of Christian scriptures. The mere idea of the covenant was not important enough, theologically, to suggest a cognate name for the collection. The latter was due to the larger complex of ideas which found partial expression for the supreme significance of Jesus in the traditional conception of religion as a covenant or a succession of covenants. When we interpret *διαθήκη* in the sense already outlined, we are in a position to recognise that it did express legitimately the significance of what the author of the epistle to Diognetus calls "this new development or interest ¹ which has entered life now and not formerly." The absorbing interest of the New Testament is this entrance of the divine will into human life and history through Jesus Christ. The new development is exhibited in a variety of aspects, but essentially as a good will of forgiveness and fellowship which is valid and permanent because Jesus has realised the conditions necessary to the revelation of God's true character and to the fulfilment of His aims for men.

"Trennen und zahlen lag nicht in meiner Natur" ought

¹ Lightfoot's rendering of *καιρον τουτου γενοσ η επιτηδευμα*.

to be a cry of penitence, and not a psalm, on the lips of a New Testament critic. He must analyse ideas as well as documents. Nevertheless, however we may criticise the forms which the valuation of Jesus as Lord assumed within the early church—and even the Pauline form abides our question—these represent the outcome of a vital experience due to the spirit of Christ. A theological use of the New Testament, in the modern sense of the term, reveals diverse conceptions of the Christian faith within the rapid development of early Christian speculation. We find serious antinomies and lacunae. Particularly in the investigation of the synoptic gospels and of Paulinism, where the problems of New Testament theology meet us in their sharpest form, we are confronted with approaches to the person of Jesus which appear at first sight to be almost contradictory. It is not easy to speak briefly on this intricate subject without appearing to be summary and hasty, but it would be disingenuous to say nothing. I can only confess that I do not find evidence for believing that somewhere within the thirties and forties of the first century Christianity suffered a sudden or gradual *μετάβασις εἰς ἄλλο γένος* and that Paulinism or the enthusiasm of the apostles was wholly responsible for the intrusion into the synoptic record of those strata which imply that the new faith was something more than a spiritual form of theism *plus* brotherly love promulgated by a singularly devout Jew. The object of New Testament theology is not the consciousness of Jesus but the faith of the Christian religion, its origin under the creative influence of Jesus, its effects in the individual and in the community, and its implicates for a Christian view of the world. Faith implies revelation, and the God of Jesus is the fundamental source of revelation for our theology. But historically and exegetically, I think, it can be shown that the faith of Jesus contains the germs of what may be called a Christology. The genetic relation of that Christo-

logy to Paulinism and to the conceptions of the Fourth gospel is another matter. But in view of the eschatological interest and the Messianic self-consciousness of Jesus, I fail to see how the impulse which created the latter theologies, with their faith in Jesus, can be described as absolutely irrelevant to the faith of Jesus Himself. The theology of the New Testament runs up repeatedly into Christology, and the problem of problems is to determine how far the essential elements of the synoptic Christology or of the more speculative reconstructions in Paulinism and the Fourth gospel are organic to the person of Jesus. This is neither the time nor the place even to outline that issue. I would merely point out in passing that the central doctrine of the Spirit in Paul, for example, may be viewed, in one aspect, as an attempt to express, in terms of contemporary psychology, the religious conviction that Jesus Christ has placed men in a relationship to God which furnishes them not simply with new moral and spiritual ideals, but with a new nature for the realisation of these ideals. Along lines like these the study of the New Testament justifies the instinct, although it may not always corroborate the arguments, which led the early church to entitle its collection "the New Testament." In a word, it is more than the canonical title or authority of the "New Testament," it is its contents, especially the gospels and Paul, which put us into the proper focus for seeing not only that they are susceptible of a theological use but what is characteristic in that use. "Things," as Hooker used to say, "are always ancients than their names." This religious aspect of the New Testament writings is formulated in their canonical title. But it is older than its formulation. It is as old, we may claim, as the first line of that early Christian literature.

I should be sorry in one way, and relieved in another, if all this seemed to you like underlining the obvious. But

what has been before my mind in taking up the duties of this chair has been the danger of the new scholasticism, which is apt to leave us engrossed with almost anything in or around the New Testament except the meaning of its religion. The scholastic theology of the middle ages had at least the merit of being alive to the interests of the faith. It was an attempt to restate the significance of the Christian doctrine in terms of Aristotelianism, and although the scholastic theologians, as Döllinger puts it, "without the elements of Biblical criticism and dogmatic history, possessed only one of the eyes of theology," they managed with their one eye to render some singular service to their religion. Our new scholasticism has Biblical criticism enough, but in poring over linguistic and textual details it may lose the vision of what really counts in the New Testament literature. This tendency is due in part to reasons with which one has genuine sympathy—to the increasing need of specialisation in research, to an impatience with the desire of pressing the texts into the service of piety or dogma, to a conscience for historical perspective in exegesis, and to an exhilarating sense that New Testament criticism has at last succeeded in vindicating its right to the academic privilege and principle that knowledge, however technical or remote, is its own end and reward. So it is. But it is part of knowledge to know what is most worth knowing, in any department. The most real thing in the New Testament is its religion, and the more severe our philological and literary methods, the more essential it is that these should be handled in such a way as to converge upon the theory or theology of that religion. Otherwise, we may know about the New Testament, but we do not know it; at any rate, we do not know it in the sound sense of knowing the spirit through the letter.

It would be small gain to escape from the bondage of theories about the verbal inspiration of the New Testament

only to fall into an uninspiring preoccupation with words and texts. The *religionsgeschichtliche Methode* has at least helped to avert that danger, although it also has been too prone occasionally to concentrate attention upon what is odd and incidental, to undervalue the power of great personalities over current ideas in its emphasis upon the law of historical relativity, and above all to forget that the main point with regard to such Oriental conceptions or semi-mythical religious forms as we encounter in the primitive Christian theology is not where they rose or what was their original shape, but what Christian thinkers took them to mean and made out of them for the specific purposes of a creative faith. Such a method, however, is able to correct its own extravagances. So is the psychological method, which is its correlative in historical New Testament research. It is along these and other lines that we can protect ourselves against the new scholasticism, not by relaxing in the slightest degree the technical discipline of the lower criticism nor by ruling out any literary or archaeological investigation which contributes to the scientific knowledge of the New Testament's origin and environment. All such contributions have their place and value in a theological school. We believe here that the most practical equipment for life is sound knowledge. Only, knowledge must be of the relevant. New Testament Greek and exegesis have a circumference which is to-day more fascinating and varied than ever, but they have a centre. And I would feel tempted to consider the work of this chair a comparative failure if men did not leave their New Testament class with the conviction that although we have to ask many questions about the gospels, some of which cannot yet be answered with any degree of certainty, the supreme question which the gospels put to us is *What think ye of Christ?*—and that they present us with sufficient materials for answering this question as it ought to

be answered by those who find within the New Testament the elements of a religion which is religion and of an adequate theology because they have learned to recognise in outline, however darkly, what is Christ's estimate of Himself in relation to God and to the world of men.

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