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# Christian Theology and the Bible\*

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## I. THE QUESTION OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

CAN theology be biblical? If so, in what sense? At first glance, at least, these questions may seem singularly foolish. After all, one does not need to be unusually observant to be aware of a wide variety of treatises on "biblical theology," emanating from a number of Christian communions, and it is tempting to close debate on the first question by drawing attention to the principle: *Ab esse ad posse valet consequentia*. As for the second question, many will answer, not only that the Bible must be the point of departure for all theological thinking, but also that we risk the distortion of Christianity by "Hellenization" or the "ontological deviation" or the "philosophical norm," if we abandon the "biblical perspective," the "Hebraic conception of the living God," the "biblical understanding of man," and formulate our theology in terms derived from an extra-biblical metaphysic. Confronted by this massive onslaught, the theologian of scholastic tendencies may well be tempted to borrow an attitude from St. Jerome and say, *Peccavi, peripateticus sum, non christianus*, and then take refuge in the "biblical point of view."

And yet, I am sure that this temptation can be and must be resisted. To begin with, the consensus from which we have just inferred the possibility of "biblical theology" is more apparent than real. It is certain that all its exponents do not use the term in the same sense, and I hope to make it clear that some of the most eager defenders of what they call "biblical theology" are talking about something quite impossible. This impossible enterprise, I should add, is precisely that retreat to the "biblical outlook" which marks a good deal of contemporary Protestant theology and which is ultimately an illegitimate, even if tempting, abdication of theological responsibility. While Christian theology cannot live without biblical roots, to say this is not to assert that theology must be biblical in any exclusive sense.

Before we set out the problem more fully, it may be useful to note that the contemporary emphasis on biblical theology raises certain perennial questions with renewed force. Of course, if "biblical theology" simply meant a survey of the religious ideas of the biblical writers (as it does in many instances), these problems would not arise. For the writers I have in mind, however, "biblical theology" really means "theology"—not just an account of beliefs once held in a particular religious tradition, but a com-

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prehensive exposition of authentic and universally valid revelation. It is to certain debatable presuppositions of this kind of theology that I wish to point.

(a) For example, the very phrase "biblical theology" assumes the unity of the biblical message, however subtly that unity may be defined in order to do justice to the wide conceptual diversity which marks the biblical formulations of religious truth. This assumption, however, brings before us the ancient question of the "spirit" and the "letter." Whether we seek, with the Fathers, to find countless prefigurations of the Christian Gospel in the Old Testament, or endeavour, with many modern theologians, to locate the unity of Scripture in the sense of the *Heilsgeschichte* which it records, we are making essentially the same attempt to interpret the biblical literature as a whole in the light of a principle derived from Christian faith.

(b) But secondly, the assumption that the biblical text by itself will suffice to remove the veil from our minds, so that we can readily discover the "spirit" within the "letter," has no immediately evident biblical basis. On the contrary, it is made within the context of the Christian tradition, and as soon as it is formulated it raises very sharply the problem of "Scripture and Tradition."

(c) Finally, the exclusive emphasis on "biblical" categories revives an attitude to which, on the whole, Christian theology has never been favourably disposed—namely, hostility to the natural reason. Even if we find Father Brown's explanation to Flambeau of his penetration of the latter's clerical disguise—"You attacked reason. It's bad theology."<sup>1</sup>—a trifle oversimplified, the principle he enunciated has presided over the theological enterprise for a good many centuries. Indeed, the greater part of Christendom would suppose that the problem had long ago been resolved in a "liberal" sense, at the latest when the *homoousion* made its appearance in the Creed, despite protests against its "unscriptural" character. I should certainly be prepared to argue that, when *theologia* emerged in the twelfth century as a unified technical discipline, over against a practical identification of theological work with the exposition of the *sacra pagina*,<sup>2</sup> and the ground was thus prepared for the subsequent developments of theological science, all this was simply the implementing of a decision rightly made by the Church centuries before—dare I say, at the moment when the Fourth Gospel was recognized as canonical?

These three questions should be kept in mind as we consider, first the virtues and then the defects of "biblical theology," and try to formulate a conclusion. While it would be unfair to lump all the exponents of a theological biblicism together and to suggest that all of them would subscribe to the most extreme propositions of any one of them, these basic

1. Cf. "The Blue Cross," in G. K. Chesterton's *The Innocence of Father Brown*.

2. To avoid misunderstanding, we should note that the term *sacra pagina* did not refer to Scripture in isolation from Tradition.

problems arise in connexion with the very enterprise of biblical theology, and one may justifiably speak of biblical theology as an entity because of the extent to which a common answer is offered for them.

## II. THE CASE FOR A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

The "biblical theology" movement derives a good deal of its force from certain considerations which every Christian theologian must respect. Thus, if we are to be critical of some fundamental elements of biblical theology, we must at the same time recognize its legitimate concerns, and I propose to comment on three of these, related to our three primary problems.

(a) In the first place, biblical theologians have been impressed by the necessity of rescuing the Bible, as an authentically theological text, from the widespread tendency to treat it exclusively as a manual of Near Eastern history or a source-book for the comparative study of religions—a tendency from which even theological schools have not been wholly free! Believing as they do in the unique significance of the Church's message as divine revelation, these writers have sought to recover the awareness of the unique significance of the book in which the Church sees the primary expression of her message. I shall suggest that biblical theology is sometimes excessively naive in its treatment of the duality of Scripture as human writing embodying divine revelation. Nevertheless, we must recognize that the theological treatment of Scripture is essential to the very life of Christian theology, and that in practice every school of biblical exegesis which has had any responsible relation to the Church has paid tribute to this necessity. Even though the Church must admit that the biblical writings, because of their human character, are a legitimate subject of historical investigation, she cannot be satisfied with the historical approach alone, since her age-long attitude towards the Bible has been one of expectation of spiritual food for the believing soul. "Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope."<sup>3</sup>

(b) A second noteworthy feature of biblical theology is its "ecumenical" concern. Biblical theologians persuasively urge that a return *ad fontes* will enable us to bypass a good deal of militant and unenlightened confessionalism. This consideration deserves to be taken seriously in a fragmented Christendom, where uninformed confessional loyalties have too often produced an arid traditionalism, less satisfactory, if only because less broadly based, than the tradition against which the compilers of the Reformation confessions rebelled. I shall suggest that biblical ecumenicists are often too optimistic about the ease with which the plain sense of Scripture can be discovered, and that this optimism stems from a failure to take the power of tradition seriously enough, or to ask what light authentic tradition may

3. Rom. 15:4. (Biblical quotations follow the RSV.)

shed on the Bible itself. Nevertheless, they are right in reminding us that, since ecclesiastical tradition and the theology of the schools are *ex hypothesi* a development of the revelation made once for all, the theological and spiritual health of the Christian mind can only be safeguarded by constant recourse to the events and words uniquely witnessed to by Scripture. On this issue, their essential concern is simply to recall St. Paul's warning: "Even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed."<sup>4</sup>

(c) A third feature of biblical theology is its concern to avoid the corruption of theology by an alien metaphysic or anthropology. Biblical theologians have stressed the danger of distorting the faith by expressing it in philosophical categories derived from a radically different world-view, or even of turning faith into philosophy—perhaps piously described as "philosophy of religion," but still philosophy! Again, this warning demands the attention of every theologian who is aware that the function of the Church is not to discover a philosophy but to proclaim a Gospel. I shall argue that biblical theologians often deal with the problem of philosophy much too simply, and that the theological house, the moment one lone philosophical demon has been evicted, is ready for occupancy by seven still more demonic demons. Nevertheless, enough has happened in Christian history to provide some moral justification for an anti-philosophical reaction in the direction of biblicism. Leaving aside the Gnostic extravagances of those who, from Valentinus and Basilides to Kant and Hegel, have more or less deliberately incorporated Christian terms and symbols into essentially non-Christian syntheses, one can note a number of important philosophical aberrations within the main stream of Christian thought. We might, for instance, point to the Origenist doctrine of creation, man and sin, with the difficulties it raises for the Christian understanding of time and history; to the tendency, visible in St. Augustine, and more dangerously exemplified in certain Christian mystics of Neo-Platonic temper, to interpret the human soul in Platonic terms, with the consequent difficulty in distinguishing the soul from the divine; to the widespread minimizing of the historical and the sacramental in the interests of a false spirituality; to the reduction of the Gospel of the Kingdom to a simple imperative of social amelioration; or to the transmuting of Christian eschatology, with its emphasis on the divine grace and power in resurrection and judgment, into a progressivist optimism about human history or the destiny of the soul. In the face of all this, one can hardly blame theologians for being impressed by another Pauline warning: "See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ."<sup>5</sup>

All these considerations may well seem to constitute a strong case for the

4. Gal. 1:8.

5. Col. 2:8.

working-out of Christian theology on rigidly biblical lines. The biblical theologian is clearly aware of the theological function of the Scriptures, of the normative and corrective use of the Scriptures, and of the ever-present danger of the infiltration of Christianity by elements essentially incompatible with its fundamental truths. And yet, I cannot see that such a drastic solution of our problems is necessary or desirable. Let us turn, then, to some reflections on the limitations of the biblical approach to theology.

### III. A CRITIQUE OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

As I suggested at the beginning, the assumptions of a biblicist theology raise certain venerable problems, which must be confronted, sooner or later, not only by the student of the history of Christian thought, but also by anyone who is not prepared to undertake biblical study in a vacuum. These problems may conveniently be dealt with in strict parallelism with the three-fold defence of the aims of biblical theology, just advanced.

(a) The theological reaction against "biblical archaeology" has its peculiar dangers, which form perhaps the most serious fault in the whole structure. At times, it may be hard not to sympathize with the reaction, particularly if we have just consulted, say, a volume of the Old Testament section of the *International Critical Commentary*, with a view to the immediate exposition of the Christian faith in the pulpit or the dogmatic theology classroom! Yet theological impatience can lead to a distortion of historical evidence by unproved assumptions or hasty generalizations—a procedure which is unbiblical, contrary to the implications of the Gospel of the Incarnation, and intellectually dishonest. For Christian thought, necessarily rooted in the Incarnation, the Augustinian formula, *per hominem Iesum ad deum Christum*, must serve as the guiding principle in the approach to Scripture. That will mean that the knowledge of the "letter" is the only path to the knowledge of the "spirit." As Richard of St. Victor put it very moderately, in one of the most important biblical commentaries of the Middle Ages: "The structure of the spiritual understanding is more firmly established, when it is duly based on the solid foundation of the historical sense."<sup>6</sup> If it is true that the clarity of the New Testament *imago* dissipates the obscurity of the Old Testament *umbra*—I refer, of course, to St. Ambrose's famous triad: *umbra, imago, veritas*<sup>7</sup>—it is also true that we apprehend the *imago* in an historical life, and that in consequence our understanding of it depends on our knowledge of that life in its historical setting. In other words, if the Christian is to see, with the Fathers, a spiritual "prefiguration" of the New Testament in the Old, he must in some sense have lived through the historical "preparation" for the New Testament in the Old, and must live by the historical realities of the New. There is a

6. *In visionem Ezechielis*, prologue (PL, 196, 527).

7. *In Ps.* 38, 25 (PL, 14, 1101); cf. Heb. 10:1.

very subtle danger of Gnosticism in any theological shortcut which evades the implications of the fact that "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh."<sup>8</sup>

(b) We should note, moreover, that the "spirit" which some biblical theologians find in the "letter" is a very subjective spirit indeed, because of their self-imposed limitations with respect to Tradition. The suggestion that we can somehow abstract "biblical" from "dogmatic" theology is at once one of the most plausible and the most misleading features of many pronouncements on biblical theology. It is true that a theological interpretation of some aspect of Scripture does not mysteriously acquire validity merely by being held by a number of people for a long time. There is, however, a traditional pattern in terms of which Christians have interpreted the Old Testament history, and in the context of which the New Testament literature emerged, and we cannot assume that we can ignore this pattern and still grasp the Christian meaning of the biblical text, even if we study the latter intensively and at length. The biblical text arose out of a history which produced certain other things as well—notably the remaining structural elements of the Church's *paradosis*, and the ongoing life of the Church thus constituted. We should note, in the first instance, the significance for our approach to Scripture of the fundamental structure itself. The Creed, rooted in the primitive *kerygma* and the baptismal confession made in response to the *kerygma*, isolates those moments of the history which constitute a key to the rest and indicates their meaning for Christian faith. The Sacraments, as efficacious signs of grace, establish the vital relation of the Christian with the climactic events of the passion and resurrection of Christ, and thus enable him to live spiritually in the biblical history. The historic Ministry of the Church, by its very continuity of commission, both witnesses to the relation of the Church to the primary events and helps to guarantee that to which it bears witness. As for the continuous life of the Church, based on this structure, it includes at the very least the corporate effort of the Christian mind to understand the biblical revelation in the setting, not simply of painstakingly reconstructed history—though the task of reconstruction cannot be evaded—but also of the living community to which the Word of God first came, and apart from which its full significance cannot be appropriated. In other words, there is something essentially contradictory in the attempt to see through the "letter" to the "spirit" outside the "fellowship of the Holy Spirit." "No prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God."<sup>9</sup>

(c) I have already suggested that an exclusively biblical approach to theology can lead to the domination of Christian thought by unacknowledged (and indeed unrecognized) philosophy. It should be added that this tendency is not least dangerous when the metaphysic adopted is that

8. I John 4:2.

9. II Peter 1:20f.

assumed (at least in germ) by biblical writers themselves. Indeed, this "fundamentalism" in relation to philosophy is more threatening than fundamentalism, old style, if only because its exponents may not quite realize what they are doing. Let me indicate two or three of the forms which this philosophical irresponsibility takes.

(i) A good illustration is provided by G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital*.<sup>10</sup> Here, along with much of outstanding value, we have (1) a dubious and one-sided emphasis on the activist, historical, non-conceptual aspects of the biblical outlook (particularly in the Old Testament), to the practical exclusion of contemplative and theological elements, and (2) an implicitly nominalistic critique of "propositional dogmatics",<sup>11</sup> which is at least partly responsible for this emphasis. In other words, we are faced here with an unexpressed philosophical viewpoint which takes advantage of the philosophical naivety of the Old Testament writers to identify itself with the theology of the Bible. Needless to say, we must recognize the centrality in Christianity of the divine action and of faith as response to the Word spoken in redemptive action, and we must not minimize the "existential" character of the biblical message, as addressed to the whole man in the totality of his thought and action. If this necessary acknowledgement is extended, however, to the point where we ignore the vision of God as the goal of faith or forget that faith is *inter alia* an earnest of the heavenly vision, such an extension can only be the effect of the influence of an extra-biblical metaphysic. To be more explicit, what we see in the exaggerated (and sometimes divergent) emphases on "myth" or "event" or "recital" is the end-product of the medieval nominalism, and concomitant anti-intellectualism, which so deeply influenced Luther's critique of the older scholasticism.

(ii) We can find another illustration of the problem in Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time*.<sup>12</sup> Here, while the same anti-metaphysical metaphysic may well be operative, the more conspicuous feature is a philosophical obscurantism which deliberately appeals to the biblical outlook as determinative (though perhaps without realizing all the implications of this appeal). There is, it is true, a sense in which the fundamental Christian doctrines of God, of his free creation of the world and man, of man's sin and God's redemptive acts, must necessarily affect the Christian approach to philosophical problems. The consequences of this principle in the history of Christian thought have been brilliantly presented, with a refreshing freedom from biblical literalism, by Etienne Gilson.<sup>13</sup> This does not, however, seem to be Cullmann's point. As contrasted with the attempt to rethink philosophy in the light of the central truths of the Christian faith, Cullmann's simpler aim appears to be the reduction of philosophy to a "biblical"

10. London, S.C.M. Press, 1952.

11. *Op. cit.*, p. 109.

12. Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1950.

13. Cf. E. Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy* (New York, Scribners, 1936).

metaphysic in a more naive sense—namely, the metaphysic, such as it was, and assuming that there was only one, implicit in the thought of the Old Testament writers, and incorporated thence into the New Testament. It is undeniable that the Greek mind, both outside and inside the Church, has not infrequently drawn, from its typical philosophy of the eternal, unacceptable conclusions respecting the divine activity in history. I think, however, that it is also undeniable that the Hebrew mind was too metaphysically innocent even to be able to make this mistake, and that this immaturity, even though it left full scope for pictorial representations of the divine action, was not in itself a superlative virtue! May it not be that the Christian mind can produce—or even has produced—a metaphysical synthesis that does justice both to the divine eternity and to the divine action, and that it is not necessarily either tied to Hebraism or taken in by Hellenism? I am not arguing that the biblical exegete should not attempt to report the philosophical ideas of his authors, just as he gives an account of their scientific conceptions and of anything else that will help us to understand what they were saying. What I do ask is that he should not simply line up texts, with or without help from an unexamined philosophy, and then present the result as decisive for Christian theology. This subtler fundamentalism is just as shoddy intellectually as fundamentalism in connexion with the biblical cosmogony or the historical difficulties of the biblical narrative.

(iii) The same criticism applies to my third illustration. When the Christian doctrine of human nature and destiny is discussed, the biblicists have a field day. Again and again, the incompatibility of the "Hebraic" concept of man as an "animated body" with the "Greek" concept of man as an "incarnate soul" is stressed, often with a good deal of oversimplification, both historical and theoretical, and we are given to suppose that loyalty to the Christian revelation somehow requires philosophical "Hebraism." Those who take this line, however, do not reflect on the possible inadequacies of the Hebrew anthropology, any more than they consider the radical change of perspective necessitated by the Christian understanding of man's transcendent destiny and worked out in St. Paul's transformation of crude "Hebraic" ideas of resurrection. Once again, a particular philosophical prejudice contributes to a biblical fundamentalism which, here as always, fails even to take into account the whole biblical message itself.

If the Christian theologian is to fulfil his responsibility in the Church and the world, he must avoid all these tempting shortcuts and face the more strenuous, but ultimately more fruitful, task of trying to deepen his understanding of the Christian faith by the instrumentality of his knowledge of the world in which he professes that faith. If we want a biblical charter for this enterprise of Christian philosophizing in complete freedom from bondage to the "letter," I suggest that we shall find it in St.

Paul: "Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made."<sup>14</sup>

#### IV. THE THEOLOGICAL USE OF SCRIPTURE

It is time to draw some tentative conclusions as a guide to the theologian in his use of the Bible. These conclusions are explicitly addressed to the theologian; it may well be, however, that incidentally they will help to assure the historical scholar, the churchman and the philosopher that it is possible to take the theological use of Scripture seriously without doing violence to their legitimate concerns. At least, I hope to make it plain that "theology" cannot be identified with an extremist "biblical theology."

(a) In approaching the problems of the historical criticism of Scripture, the theologian will not try to theologize before the fullness of the time is come. As a theologian, with a professional awareness of philosophical problems, he may find it his duty to warn the biblical scholar against allowing unconscious metaphysical presuppositions to affect his assessment of historical evidence, but it is not his business to tell the historian what evidence is there. The history whose meaning he intends to expound, as a central element of his theological work, must be real history, history as it happened. To try to impose premature patterns on the story is to risk losing contact with God's self-manifestation in history, rather than to safeguard it. The theologian does have certain criteria for his assessment of the history and his discrimination of the abiding from the transitory within it, and these criteria are not derived simply from historical exegesis of Scripture. Nonetheless, he is interested in assessing and discriminating only within the area of the historically given.

(b) In the second place, when the theologian attempts to unfold the full inner meaning of the history, one of the conditions of his undertaking is that he should live within the continuation of that history, that is, within the continuous life of the Christian community. If it is contrary to the Christian understanding of history to try to dictate to the historian, it is equally contrary to that understanding to contract out of the living fellowship which emerged from the biblical history and to which the historical revelation was entrusted. It is hard to see how the theologian can understand God's dealings with Israel in Christian terms apart from the Christian Creed, which so simply defines the meaning of the whole story. It is hard to see how he can understand the sacrificial system and the "sacraments" of the Old Covenant, to say nothing of the adumbrations of the idea of vicarious sacrifice in the "Servant Songs," in terms other than those of *Religionsgeschichte*, unless he not only knows of Christ's atonement in conceptual terms, but also lives with the Sacraments of redemption—the baptismal death and resurrection with Christ and the eucharistic *anamnesis*

14. Rom. 1:20.

of his passion and resurrection. It is hard to see how he can understand either the priestly people and the priesthood of the Old Testament or the application of sacerdotal ideas to the atoning work of Christ in the New Testament, unless he knows something of the priestly life of worship and oblation which the Church offers to God. In other words, it is hard to see how he can possibly appropriate the revelation of God proclaimed in Scripture as long as he tries to get at the theological meaning of the biblical history, as distinguished from the human details of that history, in isolation from the extra-biblical elements of Tradition. The theologian, then, must be *homo ecclesiae*, if he is not to distort the revelation which he undertakes to expound.

(c) In the third place, there is no authentic theology when there is no attempt to correlate the truths of creation and redemption with the actualities of the world that God has created and redeemed. Of course, when the theologian begins to make such an attempt, he may know something of what he can expect to find, because the very nature of the world and its relation to God imply that faith and reason overlap at certain crucial points—for example, in the awareness of the world's dependence on its divine Creator, or in the recognition that man is the kind of being who is capable of responding to the promises and the demands of the Word of God. But if he is to be an effective theologian—or, more important, an honest theologian—he must not be satisfied until he sees these truths about the world and its inhabitants, no longer mediately through the eyes of faith, but immediately in the world to which the Word of faith is addressed. This means that the theologian must be a live philosopher, who does not cling to the “biblical” metaphysic any more than to the “biblical” astronomy, but rather tries to see how the genuine philosophical implications of biblical religion are realized in the actual world, in order to understand the Gospel in its full intelligibility. *This* kind of “demythologizing” is necessary and right; what we have to avoid in our philosophizing is not the correction of the world-view of the biblical writers, but the confusion of such correction with the repudiation of truths which are not part of an exploded conception of the world and man but, on the contrary, are essential elements of the Christian faith.

Perhaps this discussion has not taken us very far. It has dealt in much too general terms with the relation between historical investigation and theological insight. It has raised the spectre of tradition and emphasized the importance of extra-biblical elements in the Christian tradition, without discussing either the historical validation of the claims made for such elements or the nature of the extension of tradition in the contemporary Church. It has stressed the necessity of genuine philosophical reflection without giving more than the simplest indication of the directions in which such reflection should move. Nonetheless, it has at least indicated the fundamental questions which the theologian must face if he is to make

adequate use of the Bible without falling into the blunders of a too narrowly biblical theology.

In the light of all this, what can "biblical theology" mean for the Christian theologian? Certainly not the impossible dream of an exclusively "biblical" interpretation of Christian faith, by which some minds are haunted, but rather a comprehensive study of biblical history and thought, undertaken from the standpoint of Christian faith and with genuine awareness of the other intellectual responsibilities of the Christian thinker. In this sense, biblical theology is a condition of the healthy functioning of the Christian intelligence, which otherwise is in danger of getting lost in the biblical history, of losing direct contact with the primary record of God's revelation, and of substituting philosophical speculation for evangelical proclamation. And yet, if "biblical theology" bypasses history, rejects tradition, or repudiates philosophy, it is arguable that the remedy is worse than the disease which it purports to cure. Obviously, then, one urgent task of contemporary theology is to discriminate wisely between the exaggerated claims of certain theologians, which it must repudiate, and the insights which it must accept as permanent acquisitions of Christian thought.