

THE WORD AND SOME NOTIONS OF TO-DAY¹

I

ALTHOUGH God's handiwork appears in nature and in history, God's chief revelation of Himself is through His Word and Spirit. The Bible is a divinely inspired record of the history of redemption. The Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture tells us what we need to know about God and ourselves, about our plight and about gracious divine aid. God has appointed this means of giving us the truth that we need ; and our chief source for knowledge of God and His will for us is the prayerful study of the Bible, comparing Scripture with Scripture. Our light is the Spirit shining upon the Word.

The Bible itself tells us that God is also revealed in nature, though the sinful human mind, Romans i. 18-25, inclines to reject this revelation or to twist it awry. The believer has clearer vision than any other observer, clear vision of the glory of God in the heavens and of His handiwork in the wide range of His creation. The child of God, trusting his Heavenly Father, considers the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, and follows Jesus to the conclusion that He Who notes the sparrow's fall will not forget to provide for us. The Word shows us how to find God in nature.

The human mind desires to unify all attainable knowledge into one articulated body of truth, so the human mind has built great systems that combine philosophy, natural science, and theology into one interconnected whole. The great medieval synthesis of Bible and Church plus scholasticism is an example. After Descartes the typical synthesis became a sort of inverted pyramid, balanced on the point of some inner certainty of the mind. In the eighteenth century the great systematizer was Wolff, who built on the work of Leibniz, the Cartesian optimist. Wolff was the first German professor of philosophy to teach and write in the German language instead of confining himself to Latin. He undertook to develop and publish rational proofs for all the doctrines of Christianity which seemed important to him.

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Hume's scepticism awakened Kant from his Wolffian dogmatic sleep, and Kant undertook to destroy the basis of rationalistic theology with his first Critique, 1781. One would have expected the universal synthesis then to disappear. Human science had made such progress, anyway, that no later Leibniz could be a master of all fields of human scholarship. But before long the Kantian Hegel attempted a synthesis more ambitious than any before him. Hegel's tower of Babel included a new philosophy of history. In the hands of smaller men, this philosophy of history sometimes becomes an interpretation of recent history in terms of one's own patriotism, a method not unknown to Virgil. The interpretation may be in terms of one's own class interest, whence Marx and his intellectual and communist progeny.

II

Anyone who believes in God will naturally expect to find frequent evidence of God's working. Studious minds, puffed up with adolescent generalizations, may proudly feel that they have outgrown belief in special providence; but they can still find God's footprints in the laws of nature and seek to think God's thoughts after Him in the workings of the world He made. Even those who, like Ritschl, discount natural theology and no longer infer God from nature, often find God in some historical "process" at work among men or around them. Be it remarked that the believer, although he may rejoice to find the hand of Divine Providence guiding and controlling his own past years, yet learns to be cautious in his interpretation of Providence's meaning for to-day and to-morrow.

One gathers that the German Christian Movement and similar efforts to build loyalty to Hitler and to Christianity into a single system of thought contrived to lean heavily upon an interpretation of recent history as a revelation of God's will for the present and future. The line of thought is something like this: "God has delivered Germany from communism, irreligion, immorality, and despair by means of Hitler and the Nazi party. Therefore God is with Hitler and his party" (cf. Keller, *Religion and Revolution*, p. 163). Then it is very easy to take another step and add: "Consequently God is with Hitler and the Nazis, in their other policies, educational, political, economic, diplomatic, military, antisemitic."

When we are very much in earnest, it is easy to convince ourselves that God is with us, and that our aims are His aims. The cloak of religion has been used to cover human and selfish interests in debates, schisms, elections, and wars on the American side of the Atlantic too.

The German Christian Movement at its height was joined by only a part of the thinkers of Germany. The entire underlying issue, as a matter of principles rather than of politics, has divided such former allies as Barth and Brunner. In less sharp form it has caused the expulsion of Barth from his chair at Bonn, so that he now teaches at Basel, in German Switzerland. His neighbour Brunner is farther up in the mountains at Zurich. For a brief summary of the recent differences between these two dialectic theologians, see Aubrey, *Present Theological Tendencies*, pp. 73-102, especially p. 101f. Aubrey belongs to the school of Shailer Mathews, but is a steadier man to follow. Modernism, indebted to Schleiermacher but modelled on Ritschl, is explained by Aubrey as trying to read through the recorded history to the actual religious experience of the New Testament writers; and thereon trying to build answers to our present day problems (pp. 25-9). Readers of this QUARTERLY are probably more inclined (1) to start from the statements of the Book; (2) then to look at our contemporary problems in the light of the statements of fact, doctrinal explanations, and promises found in the book; and (3) thus prayerfully try to work out practical solutions.

Barth's method, which hopes to hear the Word of God speak from the text of Scripture, and Brunner's, which in some ways rests more closely on the text but omits or evades certain important matters (see Archer Anderson in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 92, No. 367, p. 354ff), are not very far apart. Both acknowledge that God has spoken and that we have a Word of God. And the two Swiss are united in the existential point of view, namely that in hearing the Word we are brought under judgment, into crisis, before issues which we must decide with our all at stake.

But Barth blames Brunner for being too willing to find additional divine revelation outside the Bible. He charges that Brunner credits man with a natural susceptibility for revelation. Barth illustrates, *Nein! Antwort an Emil Brunner*, p. 16f, by someone whom a robust swimmer saves from drowning. Should the rescued man boast that he saved himself, just because he kicked a little while being pulled out? Is the undeniable fact

that he is a man and not a block of lead sufficient ground for claiming some innate power of being salvable? The sort of Evangelical Arminianism here attributed to Brunner forgets that the sinner is dead in sin.

Barth goes on (p. 22f) to rebuke Brunner for his doctrine of divinely instituted natural "orders" or arrangements (see Keller, as cited, p. 179, etc.), and for ascribing higher dignity to one institution as a creative arrangement or order of creation than to another institution which is a mere maintenance arrangement or order of providence. How do we find out about all this? asks Barth. Barth does not seem to utilize all that the Word offers on this subject; but, says he, if our information does not come from the Word we are setting up our personal point of view as pope. Apparently Barth fears that Brunner, like another former ally, will find so much divine revelation so-called in racial and political history, that he will take post beside Hirsch, Stapel, and Hossenfelder, with a flag above the Bible and a swastika hiding the cross. Nevertheless, Brunner emphatically states that when a man believes, his eye is freed from cataract so he may see clearly.

III

In opposing the tendency to depend so much upon a divine revelation found outside the Bible itself, Barth is on the side of the angels. When the Church wants to "examine itself critically", it looks not to a sociological principle or a law of physics or an axiom of mathematics, but to "the standard that is identical with its existence, which is God's revelation, which, concretely, is the Holy Scriptures" (*God in Action*, p. 44; cf. *Nein*, p. 23). Following the traditional view of his teachers, that the purpose of studying theology is to enable us to criticize our own preaching and make it what it ought to be, Karl Barth adds that the peculiar function of theology in the Church is "self-examination of the Church by the standard of the divine Word" (*God in Action*, p. 45). "Theology's essential hypothesis, or axiom, is revelation which is God's own act done in His Word and through His Spirit" (p. 41).¹

¹ A paragraph on p. 16f. fulfils a hope that I expressed at the bottom of p. 171 of *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 91, April 1934, the very month in which Barth delivered the lecture containing that fine paragraph. My footnote on p. 172 of the same is now happily out of date. And in this latest translated book Barth offers milk as well as strong meat.

Of course the priority of the Revealed Word to any mere natural or historical revelation is proclaimed by many a strong German voice. As the American newspaper editor said to the cub reporter, it is no news if a dog bites a man, but if a man bites a dog, ~~that~~ is news. The unusual attracts attention. Decent and honest living on the part of Christians will attract no fame, but let a minister do or say something foul, and the smell both ascends to heaven and spreads noxiously over the earth. Heresy makes headlines ; that is why some exhibitionists are heretics. Germany has her solid thinkers who recognize that Christian knowledge and life come directly from God.

For instance, Karl Adam, Catholic Professor at Tubingen, in his great book, *The Son of God*, p. 142 : " All upheavals and wars, every world event large and small, is God's act. The entire history of mankind is for Jesus a revelation of the living God. And since he finds the creative will of his Father in all things and in all persons, he sees these things and these persons not from without in all the deceptiveness of their appearances, but from within in their essential relation to the Will of God, as a revelation of his creative might, as the embodied will of his Father." While we cannot attain to the full understanding which the Incarnate Lord had, faith does open the way to our deeper understanding of our environment : " Only to consecrated souls, to believers, to the initiates, is the mystery world of Christianity disclosed " (p. 278).

Karl Heim, Dean of Protestant Theology at the same famous university, in his 1935 Sprunt Lectures, *The Church of Christ and the Problems of the Day*, says (p. 46), that " it is more honest to cease speaking about God altogether " than to go through a form of worship that is really directed to man or nation or human illusion instead of to " the living God, of whom the Bible testifies ". Again (pp. 122-4), after showing that a church " which lives under the guidance of Christ . . . and desires to be simply the Church of the Word " becomes a sort of public conscience and also " a helping power, a good Samaritan who heals the wounds which arise out of the present battle of life ", he states very definitely : " All these things are only the outer manifestations of the power which dwells in the Church of Christ. . . . In its essence, the Church is a self-contained structure, quite independent of all its services to the world. It is the body, which the spirit of Christ creates for itself. It

lives by the authority of Christ to forgive sins, and to call men into His Kingdom.”

* * * *

My own country is also afflicted with sundry misinterpretations of revelation due to mutilations and human additions. Some American errors of the extreme “social gospel” type are rebuked in a recent influential book, *The Church Against the World*, by Richard Niebuhr, Pauck, and Miller. After Francis Miller’s careful statement of the danger from nationalism to our Protestant churches to-day, Niebuhr goes on (p. 144f): “The eagerness with which some of the leaders . . . identify the gospel with the ideals and strategies of radical political parties . . . the efforts to amalgamate gospel and political movements in a Christian socialism indicate the reality of the danger. It is not always understood by the American section of the Christian revolt that a considerable section of the so-called German Christian Movement, in which confusion of gospel and nationalism prevails, had sources in just such a reaction as its own against an individualistic, profit-loving and capitalistic civilization, and against the Church in alliance with that civilization. There are many social idealists among the Germanizers of the Gospel; and their fervour is essentially like that of the other idealists who equate the Kingdom of God with a proletarian socialist instead of a national socialist society. The ‘social gospel’, in so far as it is the identification of the gospel with a certain temporal order, is no recent Christian invention. In the history of Europe and America there have been many similar efforts which sought ideal ends, identified the Church with political agencies, and succeeded in fastening upon society only some form of power against which the Church needed again to protest and rebel. Christianity has been confused in the past, in situations more or less similar to the present, with the rule of the Roman Empire, with feudalism, with the divine rights of kings, with the rule of majorities, with the dominance of the Northern States over the Southern, with the extension of Anglo-Saxon influence in the Orient.”

That deserved rebuke to proponents of mixed-and-mangled gospels is a welcome contribution to popular theological literature. It takes a long step in the right direction. But now comes an amazing book from Wieman and Meland, *American Philosophies of Religion*.

One is tempted to call the authors anti-theologians. Certainly Wieman holds "that it is impossible to make any rational statement about the supernatural because it is essentially irrational". The bird's-eye method of this volume requires the authors to survey all sorts of queer doctrines. But of the four groups into which they divide the thinkers whom they discuss, the supernaturalists are disposed of first and in the fewest pages. Under the name supernaturalist they combine Machen as traditional supernaturalist with a group of neo-supernaturalists extending from Barth to the Niebuhr brothers. Wieman and Meland find a little reminiscent reflection of supernatural religion in mystics like Rufus Jones, and some supernaturalistic hang-over in other idealists. For the rest, religion is nothing but natural religion. Revelation is rejected or ignored. The burden of Wieman's careful and courteous treatment of traditional supernaturalism is his effort to explain to non-supernaturalists how it is possible that "the majority of religious people in the United States still follow the way of traditional supernaturalism" (p. 62) and how it is still possible for powerful and honest leaders to hold this body of thought (p. 63f).

With all due respect to Professor Wieman, one who read *The Christian Century* during the last weeks of 1934 may question Wieman's ability as an expounder of alien systems of thought. All our teachers colleges introduce their budding educators to John Dewey, who is a remarkably clear writer. Wieman reviewed a new book of Dewey's with the triumphant cry, "Dewey is a theist now!" Dewey immediately and honestly replied, "I am not." At lame length Wieman came back: "Well, anyway, he ought to be." And the joke is that Wieman's peculiar approach to the philosophy of religion keeps him from being what most theologues mean by theist. In Wieman's method God is a cosmic process rather than "a *personal Being* who is both aware of and interested in His creatures". See Hebrews xi. 6 and 1 Peter i. 8. Also see *The Christian Century* for May 13th, 1936, p. 706, especially the third paragraph of Rall's review of Wieman and Meland's book.

As interpreted by Meland, Wieman recoils from the ascription of personality to God, but recognizes "the responsiveness of reality to man's approach" (p. 305). Elsewhere Wieman has said: "Religion of the noblest kind is man's recognition of this creative cosmic struggle and his personal allegiance to

the process of progressive integration," *Methods of Private Religious Living*, p. 216. A Christian theist may gently remark to Wieman that of course parsley adds attractiveness to a plate of meat and *may* contribute vitamins to a diet, but who could live on a ration of parsley alone? A Being behind and above any cosmic process, a Conscious Cause, a Power correctly designated as personal, One Who is not *it* but *He*: such a God demands the recognition and personal allegiance of which Wieman speaks. Personal allegiance means fealty of person to Person. God is not just Something; God is Someone. Is it not verbal pilfering for a mere humanist to take words like *God* and *theist*, words which do not belong to him, and use them for his purpose?

IV

God has spoken. The Word is God's revelation of Himself to us. The Christian who meditates upon his own heart, upon the limits of human knowledge, upon nature, upon history, finds new reasons to praise God. It is wise to study these things and learn that they are not enough unless God speaks. But these non-Biblical approaches are ancillary to theology.

God is not merely the sum of the personality-producing forces of the universe (Mathews), nor merely the creative order or sustaining process of the universe (Meland), nor is it enough to define Him as the Supremely Worthful, namely as that responsive activity in our midst which shapes life toward progressive attainment of mutual support and meaning (after Wieman). But Wieman confidently predicts that soon American philosophies of religion will be reduced to two classes; a right hand supernaturalism, which will be either dogmatic (namely Biblical) or neo- (namely along Barthian lines), and a triumphant left hand naturalism, Wieman-wise. He dares to make this assertion in spite of the painful squirming of himself and Meland in the presence of Dewey. Our fathers knew that the God of the Bible reveals Himself in nature, in mind and conscience, and in history; for His Spirit is active in the whole world of this creation, which is still under His overarching control. The same Spirit has put words into a book so that we may read the most important things that God has to tell us.

A few words of Jesus outweigh all human philosophies. Matt. xi. 25 and Luke x. 21: "I thank thee, Father, Lord of

heaven and earth." This confessional address, this audible prayer, this praise spoken in the presence of the listening disciples, formally identifies the God of theism, namely the Intelligent Power Who created and rules the universe, with the Father Whom the Saviour loved to reveal as Personal and Kindly and Gracious, as deeply concerned about His human children. The Lord of heaven and earth is the Father Whom we may approach through Jesus Christ. This Father permits human wisdom to blind itself in its own conceits and many inventions; but He reveals the things we need to know to those who, as children, will listen trustfully and will trustingly cling to His down-stretched hand and will try to follow, with mind and feet, where He leads.

God has revealed Himself. He has spoken to man. The record of His Words fills the Book which He has given us. This inspired Book is in the hands of the Church to teach the Church, to reprove the Church, to correct the Church, to instruct the Church in righteousness. This book from God is in the hands of the individual child of God for the same purposes, doctrine, reproof, correction, instruction.

V

I venture to suggest a convenient classification of some of the theories as to what this book is and how it should be used.

1. Some hold a mere *Cafeteria Theory*. For them the Bible is a display of prepared food from which you may select what you please. Help yourself to what you like and leave the rest. You are not responsible for anything beyond your own choice. It is possible to fill one's tray with good things and yet pass by what the Book offers about creation or non-resentment or guilt or election or the nation in which Jesus was born or free agency or the Lord's return or the unity of revelation. This way may or may not support real life, depending upon the selection. But, popular though it is, this way dishonours God's Word. And it scatters seeds of error, of mutilated and distorted belief and of unbelief.

I am afraid that Brunner is no better than the best in this group. Any individual or group that fails to face the whole Bible and every part of it runs the risk of falling into this cafeteria system. Social gossellers or evangelical revivalists, liberals or

literalists, too-busy pastors or onesided students, may be sliding unconsciously into this classification if the habit of neglecting important portions of revealed truth is begun. Some two years ago I thought that Barth belonged here (*Bibliotheca Sacra*, April 1934, p. 168). But while that article was in press, Barth was in Paris lecturing against "chosen truth". "Theology cannot itself select the truth which it must make valid for the Church . . . it is already selected, not *by* theology but *for* theology. . . . Is there a more sovereign act than the act of theological thinking, the act of recognition and validation of the Word of God as the Word of the Lord of heaven and earth, the Lord of life and death?" *God in Action*, p. 45. I am happy to confess my error.

2. Fundamentalists and Bible-believers are accused of holding what may be called a *Typewriter Theory*. That is, the Spirit of God used a Moses or a Paul as a typist uses a type-writing machine; the only way that the individuality of Moses or Paul could get into the record would be by way of defect, such as a letter out of line or a marred or uncleaned type-face. I do not recall ever hearing this theory advocated, but something of the sort is often attributed to conservatives. It makes a nice target for ridicule.

3. *A Dictated-but-not-Read Theory*. A busy man dictates a letter to his stenographer and tells her to transcribe and mail it without waiting for his final inspection and signature. Since there is large opportunity for mistakes to occur, this procedure is rarely followed with important letters. The addressee, warned by the notation "Dictated but not read", does not hold his correspondent responsible for all details of expression or even of matter. On this theory, the Bible contains the Word of God, and the nut may be shelled without much difficulty. To many Christians this is satisfactory; but there is the temptation to pick and choose.

4. Higher and better is the *Trained Secretary Theory*. If God prepares Amos to receive and transmit a message, and if God at a given time calls Amos, gives him an intelligible message, and exercises general oversight over his life and work, the written message that Amos leaves is the Word of God for men. That is very attractive, and I am not inclined to quarrel with it.

5. But the true doctrine of Holy Scripture goes even farther. Highest and best is a *Signed Document Theory*. The

message was given to the providentially trained human writer ; the Divine Author not only supervised the writing but also signs it triply : (1) in such words as 2 Tim. iii. 16 ; Rev. xxii. 18f ; Romans xv. 4 ; 1 Cor. x. 11 ; John xii. 3 ; (2) in the evangelizing, preserving, rectifying, educational effect of the Word on the life of the Church ; (3) in the Spirit's seal upon your heart and mine. Cf. Haitjema, *EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY*, Vol. 8, No. 2, p. 120.

Do not maim healthy doctrine by such a claim as that truth for me is only that portion of the Word of God which finds me. The pages which I do not now understand may be studied for the light that repays study ; they may be hid in mine heart that in due time when my life meets some new event their shining may illumine my way. Beware the Mormon doctrine that the Scriptures when properly translated are *a* rule of faith. "The Old Testament in Hebrew . . . and the New Testament in Greek . . . being immediately inspired of God . . . the Church is finally to appeal unto them," *Westminster Confession of Faith*, I, viii. The true guide to faith and practices is the Bible, the whole Bible, Scripture interpreted in the light of all Scripture, in prayerful dependence upon the Spirit of God.

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Those of us who find comfort and assurance in the Book itself know that God's truth is one. We know that, perhaps beyond the present spiritual discernment of the born-again, such antinomies as man's free agency and God's sovereign control are reconciled. There are no contradictions between, on the one hand, the correct description of natural phenomena, the human heart when freed from sin and error, history when all the returns are in, and, on the other hand, the Scripture properly understood. The moral life which is the Christian's walk is plainly set forth for us ; no teaching that lets Christians mistreat or dislike Christ's brethren after the flesh can be from above ; real Christianity will produce justice and kindness ; and falsehood is falsehood, no matter which side is trying to trick its neighbours (most nations are pretty well tarred with that stick). The ultimate human test of man's interpretation of nature, society, justice, history, and duty is the Revealed Will of God. Open the Bible and let the Spirit shine upon the Word.

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