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CHRISTIAN FAITH AND THE "SCIENTIFIC" METHOD¹

IT WAS indeed an honour to be asked by the editor of THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY to prepare a brief critique of Professor Bentzen's stimulating article. At the outset I should like to express my admiration and respect for the challenging work which Professor Bentzen has done in the study of the Old Testament. To my mind he is one of the most thought-provoking writers in this field to-day, and I gladly confess my indebtedness to him, even though I have been unable to accept his basic presuppositions and attitude towards the Old Testament.

Perhaps the best way of evaluating Professor Bentzen's article is first of all to set forth briefly the orthodox Christian position with respect to the question of methodology and then, finally, upon the basis of this position, to make certain comments upon the article. A consistently Christian methodology must at the outset presuppose the existence of God the Creator of heaven and earth. In order, however, to avoid misunderstanding, it is necessary to state precisely what such a statement means. The God of Christianity is the living and true God, who exists in utter independence of His creation. He has need of nothing; rather, He is completely sufficient unto Himself, for in all of His attributes and perfections He is infinite, eternal and unchangeable.

In the work of creation God did not bring the heaven and earth into existence from previously existing material. That would have been no true creation at all. Nor are the heaven and the earth emanations from the being of God. By creation the Christian means that God, by the Word of His power, spake, and things which previously had no existence, came into existence. The conception is one which our finite minds cannot completely grasp. We are creatures, and we cannot thus create. God, however, is infinitely exalted above us. He alone can create. Indeed, by His act of creation, He is to be distinguished from idols and false gods: "For all the gods of the nations are idols: but the Lord made the heavens" (Ps. xcvi. 5).

¹ I wish to express indebtedness to my colleague, Dr. Cornelius Van Til, for reading this paper and for his helpful suggestions.

Since, according to Christianity, God is the Creator in this high and unique sense, certain conclusions follow. For one thing, the heavens and earth, including man, are not creators but creatures. All facts, therefore, are created facts. Every aspect of life and existence is a created aspect. All created things can have their ultimate meaning only in the Creator: "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for Thy pleasure they are and were created" (Rev. iv. 11). Precisely the same thing is taught by the Apostle: "For of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever" (Rom. xi. 36).

The Christian confession is: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." Since this utterance of the Apostles' Creed is true, it follows that man the creature can never set for himself the goal of exhaustive knowledge or complete comprehension. And the reason should be perfectly clear. The human mind is not an infinite mind; it is finite. It is not a mind whose powers are without limit and bounds; it is rather one whose powers of comprehension and understanding are circumscribed by the fact that it is created.

Furthermore, in its investigation of the facts, the human mind must ever remember that the facts to be investigated are themselves created. In other words, any meaning that can be found in the created universe is a derived meaning, which is derived from God Himself. God, who alone is the Possessor of absolute and ultimate interpretation, has clothed His creation with derived interpretation. The facts have meaning, therefore, only because God has given them meaning. Whatever meaning there is in the facts to be investigated in the created universe is derived from God the Creator. The investigator must think God's revealed thoughts after Him. He must seek to discover the meaning which God has placed in the facts of the universe.

To appeal to facts apart from God, as though the facts somehow existed by themselves, is at the outset to deny the Christian position and to preclude any possibility of arriving at the truth. To regard the facts as neutral, when actually they are created facts, is to begin one's investigation with an incorrect pre-supposition. Consequently, the result of such investigation can only be to lead the investigator further and further from the truth. It is this kind of investigation which is often regarded

to-day as scientific. In reality, however, since the presuppositions with which it begins are wrong, it is not scientific at all.

It may be well also to stress the fact that upon the basis of the Christian position not every hypothesis has relevancy. One or two examples should make this clear. If the investigator begins his research upon the basis of the supposition that the world is eternal, he will never arrive at the truth, for, as a matter of fact, the world is not eternal but had its beginning in a creative act of God. Or, if an investigator should allow the legitimacy of the hypothesis that miracles, such as the resurrection of our Lord, were not possible, he would never arrive at the truth, for God has told us that He did, as a matter of fact, perform miracles. Only those hypotheses may have any theoretical relevancy which are consonant with Christian-theistic presuppositions.

The above is a very brief statement of what we may call the Christian-theistic principles of methodology or scientific investigation. If, however, Christian theism be true, why is it not vigorously embraced by all men? The answer has been given to us by God Himself: "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. iii. 23). All the effects of sin have been evil upon man, and one of these is the darkening of man's understanding, which theologians would call sin's noetic effects. Man, as a sinner before God, is in basic error in all his thoughts and ways. Although the glory of the Creator is magnificently displayed in the theatre of the created universe, man is blind to it. The heavens actively proclaim the glory of God, and the firmament causes to make known that it is God's handiwork. Sinful man, however, misreads the message. He does not behold the world as created, nor does he bow down in gratitude and adoration before the Creator. Rather, he seeks some other explanation of the creation. He either regards it as eternal or as somehow existing in its own right. He puts the creation in the place of the Creator. Moreover, he regards the mind of man as somehow ultimate and existing in its own right. He bows down to the creature, rather than to the Creator. He exalts man, not God.

To sinners God has given His Word which tells of what He has done to deliver them from the guilt and power of their sins. The sinner, however, misunderstands the Bible, just as he misinterprets the created universe. He regards the Bible as the product of human minds, and will not accept it as a special, divine revelation. The Christian, on the other hand, regards it

as God's Word, not because of any superior powers of intellect which he possesses, but only because the Holy Spirit has testified to the sinner's spirit that the Scriptures are divine.

When, therefore, Professor Bentzen argues that the only means at the disposal of the investigator are those of historical criticism, we are unable to agree. The first tool which every scholar must employ is the presupposition of the truth of Christian-theism. Unless he does this, he has at the very beginning placed a wrong interpretation both upon the nature of his own mind and also upon the nature of the created universe. Hence, he is bound to arrive at wrong conclusions. Upon the basis of Christian-theism the investigator may employ all his talents and all the available stores of the created world for the glory of the Creator. If, in the study of certain questions, as, for example, that of the identity of the author of Ecclesiastes, the scholar may not come to final conclusions, it is only because all the facts are not known to him. In dealing with questions such as this, the investigator must do the best he can, providing that he does not violate the basic presuppositions of Christianity.¹ To put it in slightly different terms, the investigator must be a Christian in his study or laboratory, just as much as in his worship of God upon the Sabbath.

Furthermore, we cannot agree that the accounts of miracles must be left unused or that they are outside the realm or limits of scientific investigation. By what authority may one lay down such a condition? Let us consider the case of the resurrection of Christ. Suppose that the resurrection did actually take place, just as the Scripture relates. Suppose, in other words, a real miracle did occur. If our "scientific" method of investigation leads to the conclusion that Jesus did not rise, or if it declares itself unable to deal with the question, then we must ask, "Is there not something the matter with our 'scientific' method?" To be more specific. We begin to investigate the belief of the early Church, and we adopt the "scientific" method. Since we

¹ Since the conservative critic believes, upon the basis of the Bible's testimony to itself and by persuasion of the inward testimony of God, the Holy Spirit, that the Bible is the Word of God, he will not admit the presence of error in the express teaching of Scripture. It may seem, therefore, that at times he glosses over or minimises the difficulty in connection with the solution of certain problems. However, rather than declare the Scripture to be in error, he would withhold judgment, believing that he does not have all the facts at hand. The case of Darius the Mede will serve as an example. If we are to act in consistency with the Christian-theistic principle, we shall reserve judgment as to the identity of Darius. We do not know enough positively to declare that he is unhistorical. On the other hand, we do not know enough to make any positive identification.

have already decided that miracles are not now our concern we arrive at the conclusion that the disciples thought that Jesus had risen from the dead. This conclusion, however, is not satisfactory. Was this belief of the early disciples mistaken or not? Our investigation has not even gone to the heart of the matter. We have begun with incorrect presuppositions; we end with incorrect conclusions. If Christian-theism is true, then investigation must deal with the question of miracle; indeed, miracle can have meaning only upon the basis of the truth of Christianity.

In scientific investigation of the history of Israel, Professor Bentzen would raise the question of credibility. Well and good, but one point should be stressed. Who is to judge as to what is credible and what is not? In other words, it is only upon the basis of Christian-theism that there can be credibility. A non-theistic philosophy, since it must needs regard the creation as ultimate, and hence is basically in error, cannot give any true meaning to the term "credibility". The principle of credibility can only have meaning upon Christian-theistic presuppositions. Hence, only upon such presuppositions can it be applied in the study of the history of Israel or in any other study. To admit the legitimacy of any other presupposition is to admit the falsity of true theism. We agree therefore in the application of the question of credibility, but we cannot grant that any true meaning can be given to the principle apart from the meaning which the self-conscious and self-subsistent God gives to it.

In a study of the culture and religion of Israel, Professor Bentzen believes that the question of credibility need not be raised. In this field, he maintains, the investigator's task is to describe, not to pass judgment. Miracles are useful here, because they enable one to see the better what ancient Israel believed. We believe, however, that even in this field the question of credibility must be raised. Indeed, it cannot be evaded. We set out to describe the religion of Israel, and what do we find? We find, for example, that the Pentateuch claims that a bush burned and yet was not consumed. We then proceed to describe the belief of the men of ancient Israel. "They believed," we say, "that a bush burned, yet was not consumed." But is our task completed with such a description? By no means. Were the Israelites mistaken in this belief? Was their religion a religion that was true or not? We have not described the religion of Israel until we have described it as fully as possible. Was Israel's belief founded

upon fact? It is only upon the presuppositions of Christian-theism that we can answer this question. And so, when in harmony with the basic presuppositions of Christianity, a Christian describes this particular episode in the religion of Israel, he will say: "Moses believed that the bush burned and was not consumed, because such was actually the case." The religion of Israel, in other words, was a true religion, a revelation from the Creator of heaven and earth.

Finally, the question of credibility must surely be raised when we come to the matter of personal reaction. But it can only be intelligently raised upon the foundation or background of Christian theism. Professor Bentzen offers a standard that may be employed in this matter. It is a standard that he names "*the self-criticism of the Bible*". Examples of it are found in Christ's "But I say unto you . . ." of the Sermon on the Mount, or in Paul's rejection of the Law as a means of salvation. What, however, is the basis of our acceptance of such a standard? Why should we necessarily accept the "But I say unto you . . ." of the Sermon on the Mount as over against the Mosaic Law? Why should we follow Paul in the means of salvation rather than the works of the Law? What ultimate standard have we to tell us that the spirit displayed by the Servant of Isaiah liii is to be preferred to that displayed in the Song of Deborah (granting for the sake of the argument that there really is an essential difference)? Why, to get down to bedrock, should we have any desire to "be completely and absolutely on the side of God, in the service of God"?

If we are really to obtain satisfactory answers to these questions; if we are really to deal with the question of credibility, we must go deeper than this. We can find help only if we unreservedly accept the position of historic Christianity and become theists in the fullest sense of the word. The standard of the "*self-criticism of the Bible*" can only have meaning if based upon the Christian-theistic position. Did God create man? Did the death of Jesus Christ atone for my sins? Did Jesus Christ rise from the dead? Is His resurrection an historical fact, or is it not? These are questions which must be answered. Upon the foundation of the Christian-theistic position, they may be answered, and they may be answered correctly. Upon any other basis, they cannot be answered. The standard of "*self-criticism of the Bible*", as set forth in the learned article which we are now engaged in

considering, will not answer these questions. To answer them we need an authority that is omniscient. And such an authority is to be found in the God of Scripture alone. It is to His voice that we must listen, not only in considering these questions, but in considering all other questions also. The only standard of credibility is the revelation of God Himself which we call the Holy Scriptures. When these tell us that Christ did arise, it is as though we hear the very words pronounced by God Himself, for these words are indeed His. And we need no longer doubt: "Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first-fruits of them that sleep" (1 Cor. xv. 20). The Christian believes this fact, because God has told him that it is true.

In adopting the position outlined above, we realise that we are cutting ourselves off from the main stream of Old Testament research to-day. We do not adopt the position of Christian-theism because of tradition. We adopt it because we believe that it is the only possible explanation of life and reality. All contrary presuppositions lead to intellectual chaos and suicide. It is our profound conviction that contemporary Old Testament investigation is largely under the influence of a Kantian epistemology which in its very nature cannot lead to Christian faith. We pray that God will send His Holy Spirit to convict the learned and gifted investigators of our day that only a consistently Christian method of research will really advance the cause of Biblical studies. Thomas Aquinas remarked that theology "was taught by God, it teaches God, it leads to God". We would go further and say of all creation that it is taught of God, teaches God and leads to God. Unless this is also true of our methods of investigation, we have not found the way.

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