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In The Study

THE English-speaking world has not been well served so far as commentaries on the Psalms are concerned, and the fruits of modern research and understanding in this field have not been readily and widely available. Things have moved fast and far since the beginning of this century, and Kirkpatrick's sober and prosaic exposition with its cautious reaction against a Maccabean dating for the Psalter reads strangely as from a bygone age. It is true that more than a decade ago Elmer Leslie made a sterling contribution in a weighty and still valuable presentation which, while suffering from a tendency to over-systematize, mediated in popular style the emphasis and perspective associated with the work of Gunkel and Mowinckel. But it is only now that the gap has really and satisfactorily been filled by the translation of a monumental study[1] that runs to over eight hundred pages, provides introduction, text and commentary, and is quite amazing value for money.

It is impossible to comment in any satisfactory way upon the mass of exposition. This is based upon the author's own translation from the Hebrew, but the text here provided is that of the Revised Standard Version except where the latter differs in some material way from that of Professor Weiser. The general approach is never merely historical. A sustained attempt is made to provide links with full New Testament religious understanding and to interpret within the context of the whole biblical revelation. Perhaps there is a pointer here to a danger that is not completely avoided. Just occasionally I have the impression that some harsh realities of sub-Christian expression in the Psalms are being falsely argued away by a vision that is slightly too eager to establish their abiding insight and significance.

But the reader who is content with sampling the commentary as occasion arises and need demands will be wise to return again and again to the introductory material. Weiser is not content with a simple form-critical approach which would analyse the Psalter into fixed poetic types in terms of dependence upon an alien oriental cultural background. Attention must be paid to the history of the Old Testament cultus which acted as the bearer of living tradition. Yet this does not mean a preoccupation with agricultural religious festivals such as belonged to Canaanite practice. Rather is the essential rooting of the Psalms to be located in the Covenant Festival of Yahweh, celebrated in the New Year by the tribal confederacy of Israel where, by the word of recitation of the cultic

narrative (of which the Hexateuch is elaboration) and the deed of sacred action, the history of salvation was dramatically re-enacted and Israel was remade as the People of God.

Such a conclusion is not arbitrarily asserted. Rather is it carefully argued by way of a serious examination of this great Covenant Festival of Israel. Weiser admits that the details have not been preserved for us. But he believes that it is possible to disentangle from the mass of Old Testament material the basic ideas and essential character of this annual religious observance; and this he attempts to do. He is then in a position to draw lines, straight and true, to the recurring elements and emphases of the Psalter. It is an illuminating process. It gives the Psalms context and rooting, and thus new meaning.

Now all this is not new; neither is it precisely Old Testament "orthodoxy." It is broadly representative of a view that increasingly gains ground. But here the enunciation is unusually rigorous and exclusive. Let the reader be warned! Whether this sort of restatement will stand in all main particulars, time alone will show. While the experts debate, most of us will continue to be deeply grateful for a work that has important implications for the understanding not only of the Psalter but of the Bible as a whole.

A sustained thrust along a narrow front is what the Abbot of Downside offers to his readers in a book[2] which should command sympathetic attention from all who care for the unity of the Church of God. The narrow concentration of enquiry has the strength of making possible an adequate and painstaking investigation. Does it also invite the danger of an artificial isolation of one aspect of a great reality which demands a broader treatment if truth is to be established? I am not sure. Neither, I think, is the Abbot. But he recognizes the peril, and judges that it will not substantially menace the successful discharge of his enterprise. He will ask concerning the nature of the church as "one." It is an entity—but of what kind?

F. D. Maurice and other theologians have spoken of the church as a society. But if words are really meaningful, more may be involved in this description than they suppose. Three possibilities confront us as we seek to do justice to the church militant here on earth. She may be an invisible entity; she may be one, unique visible community; she may be a potential society, moving towards a visible unity not yet attained. An examination of Scripture disposes conclusively of the first viewpoint and inclines us towards the second. An investigation of the major tract of Christian history reveals not only an unbroken assumption of the second belief but also the virtual impossiblity of any other—unless we are prepared to jettison some basic Christian doctrines, rooted in the Bible, affirmed by church councils, and accepted by Protestant and

Catholic alike. Let the ecumenical movement, then, which in general proceeds in terms of the third possibility, recognize the true logic of its own fundamental perspectives.

There is logic here. There is persuasiveness, and an attractive humility. All roads may lead to Rome. But we are to be convinced by way of a disarmingly apologetic demonstration of the logical impossibility of the tracks to Canterbury and Geneva. Certainly the examination of the doctrinal controversies of the early centuries is to be welcomed not only for its own sake but also for the appraisal and criticism which Abbot Butler provides. Certainly the idea of the church as essentially an invisible entity receives some well-deserved hammer blows. And certainly non-Romans should be provoked to think again. The provisional reservations occur at two points. I am not entirely persuaded that we can arrive at the solution to the particular question at issue unless at the same time we ask and seek to answer other related questions. Nor am I sure that this book quite gets to grips with the problem that may, in the end, govern all—namely the problem of eschatology. The Abbot gives us a dozen pages, but does not perhaps dig deep enough. For the question of eschatology at this point is the question of the theological relationship between Christ and the church, between Head and members. It is good to find it roundly asserted that Roman doctrine does not equate the Kingdom of God with the institutional church. What is not so clear is whether there is any recognition that the Church must be understood not simply in terms of Incarnation but also in terms of Atonement.

A collection of essays[3] by Cambridge dons deserves more attention than most symposia of its kind. Natural theology, comparative religion, biblical understanding, doctrinal restatement, science, ethics, the nature of theological understanding—it is a broad coverage, and a bold excursion that promises well. This is the "broad church" seeking to perform its mission for a new day and generation. It is the work of men who will not abide the tight, closed, withdrawn circle of revelation. It is the assertion of a reasoned faith which takes seriously the world of God's creation and therefore the final unity of all knowledge.

The aim is not set too high. The time for reconstruction is not yet, and definitive answers are not to be expected. What is important is the recognition and posing of the fundamental questions, and a grappling with them rather than an evasion of them. This is why the authors must speak in terms of "soundings," are content to take bearings and write prolegomena. If the result is from time to time a straying from the narrow confines of what we class as orthodoxy, this need not disconcert or surprise. Unless the church gives to her thinkers due liberty to range wide and pioneer she may preserve her garments superficially white and unspotted but she is unlikely to

storm the citadels of the twentieth century. Unless all things are proved, sifted and tested, we are likely to lose our grasp of that which is finally and enduringly good.

In the end these contributors achieve most success not in plotting the future but in exposing the mess that we are in. They rebuke our complacency, expose our predicament, and sound a warning. Science and theology may seem to have come to terms, but we have smothered the conflict rather than solved it. The broad lines of Christian morality may seem clear enough, if somewhat difficult of contemporary application, but perhaps we are not even in sight of a truly creative theological ethic. Natural theology in traditional and conventional form may be open to all the strictures currently levelled against it, but are we to be satisfied with the attempt to reach land through the escape hatch of a positivism of revelation? Other religions can no longer be ignored in a shrinking world, but to what extent are we prepared to begin a sympathetic dialogue and in what terms shall we rightly speak of the supremacy and uniqueness of Christ? These are living issues. We should be thankful for a stimulating discussion of them.

Dr. Vidler and his colleagues cast their net widely. But there are other spots where the water urgently requires to be tested, and where examination reveals it to be almost incredibly murky. Church architecture of the last twenty years in this land may accurately and uncharitably be described as a monument to many things, not least to British insularity. On the continent and to some extent in the New World biblical, liturgical, and theological renewal has been allowed to have its influence on church building, but here the country which has led the world in the building of schools has, with a few rare and striking exceptions, produced a lamentable series of architectural hangovers. It is all very sad; and symptomatic of a terrifying malaise. But at last there are stirrings of better things, and three dates deserve to be recorded. The first is 1957, which saw the formation of the New Churches Research Group, a body of clergy and architects, interdenominational in scope, reaching outside the Christian community, and committed to serious study at depth and continuing research and conversation. The second is 1960, which saw the appearance of a work entitled *Liturgy and Architecture,* written by Peter Hammond, one of the Group's moving spirits, exposing our predicament, enunciating the new insights, and sounding a clarion call to reform. It also witnessed the launching of a periodical, now entitled *Churchbuilding,* designed to stimulate, discuss and inform. The third is 1962, which was marked by the establishment of an Institute for the Study of Worship and Religious Architecture at Birmingham University. Meanwhile various "papers" prepared by members of the New Churches Research Group have been privately circulating. Largely on the basis of these

a composite volume,[4] containing contributions both from the theological and the architectural standpoints, is now set before us.

It should help to remove a great many misconceptions; and it possesses at least two great merits. The central theme is given a wide and generous setting; we are not allowed to go away still harbouring any impression that this is a private ecclesiastical problem. We must indeed proceed theologically, but a true doctrine of the church inevitably demands that the building be related not only to the worshippers but also to the world in which it is set. Beyond this, it is of the utmost importance that the writers are fully aware that there are no neat, universally applicable solutions, and that if a little can be seen clearly and the true line of advance marked out yet the need for pioneering and experiment remains. It is, however, true that the thinking represented here springs mainly from Anglican and Roman sources. For this fact the Free Churches have no one to blame but themselves. Nevertheless, we had better be sure that we do not quite swallow all this whole. There are some nice questions to be faced about the relationship between Word and Eucharist, baptism and infancy, choir and congregation; and at certain points the answers to them will be found to be determinative.

Among the many incisive comments, let this suffice. "Church architecture has for a long time been incomprehensible to the modern architect, because the subject has generally been discussed in terms of atmosphere and religious sentiment. On the other hand, Christians have been inclined to regard all modern architecture as a product of materialism." Exactly! Religion is spiritual and worship is cerebral. Until that twin aberration is nailed, perhaps the less we build the better.

It has long been my conviction and experience that students of baptism are apologetically their own worst enemies. If I am ever tempted to doubt the validity of the Baptist case a reading of a book designed to defend infant baptism will instantly restore me to a state of grace. On the other hand I can be serenely confident that I shall arise from the perusal of any standard apologia for believers' baptism a convinced paedobaptist. This curious process makes for wide and varied reading rather than abiding satisfaction. And it suggests to me that there is a certain emptiness and unreality attaching to a considerable part of the current debate. Both sides unload their block-busters with guaranteed accuracy, and the resultant explosions are tremendous. But when the smoke has cleared the enemy positions are apparently untouched, and nobody seems inclined to come over to the other side. It appears that somehow or other the deadly missiles never got within miles of their targets.

I fancy that all this has something to do with major presuppositional discrepancies. Either way it explains why I approach another

book on the sacrament of unity[5] with deep-rooted scepticism. The superficial signs do not encourage. The publishers amuse me with a dust-jacket which portrays what seems to be a cross between a collection plate and a roulette wheel, and irritate me with what has now become a traditional game—the misspelling of the names of Denn(e)y and Culman(n). But the volume is handsomely produced, the author was once kindly enough to give me a sympathetic review, and the book is weighty enough to merit serious treatment. I am not entirely clear as to the audience for which it is primarily intended. But I think that the Anglicans will see the point, the Church of Scotland and the continentals probably won't, and the Baptists ought to treat the whole argument as required reading.

Now this is an enormously thorough treatment of a particular area of enquiry. The range of relevant literature taken into account is immense. The biblical text is taken with tremendous seriousness by one who is determined not to run up imposing theological edifices without having first laboured on the foundations. The most convincing section is surely that which deals with the Pauline epistles, for here a master craftsman has been at work. It is the treatment of the Gospels and of the Acts that occasionally arouses hesitations. I am not at this point concerned with the details of exegesis and interpretation. Obviously there will be disagreement here and there. It is rather the attitude to the material, the way of approach, that raises the important questions. Let us put three quotations side by side. (1) "Our primary object is to discover, not the secondary use to which the Evangelists might have put the sayings, but their meaning on the lips of Jesus." (p. 73.) (2) ". . . there are clear indications that (the Fourth Evangelist) is sensible to the situations in which his teaching is set, and he provides signposts for the right perspective in which to view it." (p. 229.) (3) "By the time the Gospel was composed, baptism in water and baptism in Spirit had come together, and the Evangelist was addressing his readers." (p. 303). Here *in nuce* is the determinative question. How do we use the Gospel material? How far do we use it as evidence for the mind of the Incarnate Lord on some particular theme, and how far as expressive of the mind of the Evangelists?

Let it be granted that there is no easy answer here. Let it also be granted that the issue is sufficiently open for a great many attitudes to be defensible. Nevertheless, our decision at this point will affect our use of Gospel testimony and our method of theological construction. My difficulty is that I cannot quite see where Dr. Beasley-Murray stands, and am not at all sure that he stands with consistency anywhere. The answer we get from the biblical text depends so much on how we put the question; and unless we have adopted some general position we shall tend to frame each individual question in just that way which will provide us with the answer we

desire. Let him who is without sin cast the first stone—yes, indeed! But the reader should be warned to be on the alert.

Let me bring it down to cases. What justification is there for using John 4 : 1 to assist the interpretation of Mark 10 : 38 and Luke 12 : 50? Is not conflation of Gospel material a highly suspect practice? Is it fair to attempt explanation of the various baptismal contortions in Acts without some prior assessment of the standpoint of Lukan theology? What attitude are we going to adopt towards St. John's Gospel? Granted that the Fourth Evangelist has "historical sense," that he was "addressing his readers," and that he was conscious "of the unity yet distinction between the ministry of the incarnate Son and that of the exalted Lord," should this lead us to interpret the Nicodemus episode in terms of the historical context of the Ministry?

It is easier to ask such questions than to answer them. But the answers reveal a man's presuppositions; and it is these that I find so difficult to disentangle in this book. Yet the very raising of such fundamental issues indicates sufficiently the weight and value of this exhaustive study. It should for long stand as the best thing in its field that Baptists have produced, and if the denomination can catch up with its author there may be hope for us yet. Of course, there remains much ground to be traversed. We are not offered any coherent or systematic theology of baptism; only doctrinal implications of the New Testament evidence. But these promote the conclusion that New Testament baptism is to be understood in terms not of mere symbolism but of the fullness of saving grace. Let the author be convicted of high sacramental belief. But let Baptists also realise that it is only on the ground of high sacramentalism that the case for believers' baptism can stand.

[1] Artur Weiser: *The Psalms.* S.C.M. 70s. 1962.

[2] B. C. Butler: *The Idea of the Church.* Darton, Longman & Todd. 30s. 1962.

[3] A. R. Vidler (ed.): *Soundings.* Cambridge. 21s. 1962.

[4] Peter Hammond (ed.): *Towards a Church Architecture.* The Architectural Press. 30s. 1962.

[5] G. R. Beasley-Murray: *Baptism in the New Testament.* Macmillan. 50s. 1962.

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