

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

In The Study

ANOTHER book on worship, but with a difference; for here is a volume¹ which ranges widely, exploring both America and Europe, and yet avoids the danger of becoming a superficial sight-seer's tour by focusing on the Reformed churches, their classic tradition and developing history. A lively, thoughtful, informative study which nearly always gets its facts right.

In the historical field Mr. Hageman brings to light material which will be new to many; but the conclusions are almost inevitably of a kind with which we are now almost over-familiar. I think, however, that among them there is one in particular that will increasingly demand our attention in the coming days. It is the fact of the spiritualisation (and therefore intellectualisation) of Reformed and indeed Free Church worship. For the Bible the opposite of spiritual is carnal. For us the opposite of spiritual is material. And just here piety seems to have become almost irretrievably perverted. The more we emphasize and exalt the spiritual, the more we reject and debase the material. The result in worship has been that what appeals to the mind is "in," and what appeals to the senses is "out." It means a dualistic understanding destructive both of an incarnational faith and of a truly spiritual worship. It is the really baneful legacy of Ulrich Zwingli. Any attempt at reform of worship which ignores this pervasive disease must finally fail.

Meanwhile, our author, writing from the American scene, has unconsciously warned us of where we may eventually find ourselves if one of the trends among us in this country continues unchecked. "The visitor to the village Bethel today is likely to find that the pulpit desk has been shoved to one side and the tiny Communion Table moved to the centre of the platform, decorated with the silver candlesticks from someone's dining room and one of those brass crosses which is turned out in distressing monotony by some enterprising manufacturer of church goods. Gone is the amusing variety of hats which once brightened the choir loft. The choir is now turned out smartly in purple gowns with cerise stoles. The minister has shed his cutaway and striped trousers. He now wears varying combinations of borrowed ecclesiastical plumage, a Geneva gown, an Anglican stole, a Lutheran pectoral cross, a Hathaway shirt and tie. The old harmonium has been reluctantly replaced by a new electronic organ which, as the chart in the vestibule shows, has not quite been paid for." No, this is not a manifestation of the liturgical movement. It is what that movement aims to save us from—if it is in time!

There will, of course, be those who view the emphases and pre-occupations of Mr. Hageman without sympathy; and the impression left by a reading of the third and final volume of his *Dogmatics* is that Emil Brunner would be among them. In this book² Dr. Brunner brings the labour of a quarter of a century to its conclusion. Many will turn to it eagerly; for its author has long commanded in the Anglo-Saxon world an attention, sympathy, and respect denied to most continental theologians. This is partly because he is one of the few who have really managed to look theologically and receptively beyond the European borders. It is also due in part to the fact that his style and approach are so congenial to us. He writes with the sort of clarity we look for; he asks the questions we want to ask; he provides the commonsense kind of answer. A "no nonsense" theology, without too much dialectical verbiage or subtle and elusive concept. The strength which creates it is a gripping missionary and apologetic passion. The weakness which occasionally mars it is the haunting sense it sometimes leaves of a dimension of depth unexplored. This volume is a moving one, produced as it was in the face of prolonged illness. It is also disappointing.

The presentation is made in three sections. The first of these, with its ecclesiological preoccupation, rests upon his earlier work in *The Misunderstanding of the Church*; the second, dealing with faith, looks back for its inspiration to *The Divine-Human Encounter*. The third, concerning itself with eschatology, is in basic harmony with his book *Eternal Hope*. This last section need not here detain us. The really significant issues are not concentrated at that point.

But *The Divine-Human Encounter* was an epoch-making study, and the present exposition of faith which owes so much to the general position promulgated therein is superb, profound, and extraordinarily liberating. Brunner develops his thesis under the general heading of "The New Life in Christ," and almost inevitably so, since he understands faith to be nothing less than the totality of existence of those who belong to Christ. Here is a sentence which is worth pondering: "When we set faith and revelation over against each other as 'content' and knowledge of this content, we fail to do justice to what happens in faith. . . . Faith is itself what revelation has in view." This is the familiar Brunner, attempting to move beyond the subjective-objective antithesis to a unified understanding which does justice to the wholeness of truth.

Yet this interpretation of faith which he advances is set over against, almost in opposition to, any definition in terms of belief in right doctrine. Similarly, where the Church is in question, we are bidden to distinguish sharply between brotherhood and institution and to see the traditional institutional understanding of the Church as a fatal departure from New Testament proclamation. It is just

here that the first major hesitation must be recorded. Granted that the inner essential meaning of both Church and faith is as Brunner records, and granted also that Christian practice and understanding has constantly obscured this fact, it nevertheless does not follow that so unqualified an either-or is justified. The relationship between faith and order, between Word and sacrament, is in fact of a different character and a closer and more subtle kind than Brunner allows. Perhaps it is small wonder that he misreads Clement and Ignatius through the spectacles of developed "catholicism."

Two further and fundamental questions must be raised. Is the kind of personalism for which Brunner argues really adequate as a controlling concept? Few would wish at this stage to go back on the broad personalistic understanding which has done so much to break open traditional theology in the modern age. Yet taken too narrowly and exclusively it does seem to create a certain blindness to the whole created structural situation within which men are set by God. Personal relationships are not to be thought of *in vacuo*. The Church is essentially a brotherhood of love. It may also and without contradiction be a sacramental society. Institutionalism may be a perversion and a curse; it is not so clear that the true Church cannot be an institution. Terms must be used carefully. Too often Dr. Brunner commands initial assent because he sets up for quick demolition some mediaeval understanding—or misunderstanding.

Finally, I should want to question him concerning his use of Scripture. I have the lurking feeling that his use of the New Testament cuts it a little too far adrift from the Old. Certainly the contemporary danger is rather the other way. But we must watch our pendulum carefully. It is hard to reconcile many of his emphases with the best insights of contemporary New Testament scholarship. Take a statement such as this: "Is the Lord's Supper celebrated by the Pauline community symbolic? Yes, certainly, for it is the same as that first Supper where Jesus was still Himself bodily present. . . ." A curious dogmatic statement. Let us be fair and make clear that it is used to exclude the idea of transubstantiation. But what is lacking is any visible appreciation of the fact that an exegesis other than his own does not necessarily land us in transubstantiation at all.

Perhaps after all he is involved himself in the misunderstanding of the Church. And if at this point he goes astray we shall be wise to scrutinise with extra care his whole theological perspective. Whatever conclusion may be reached the task itself will be rewarding, and for it this volume and its two preceding companions provide the valuable material.

In his time Brunner has had some emphatic things to say about infant baptism; and the debate over the origin and development of the rite within the Church continues. Principal Beasley-Murray has

rendered great service in providing a translation of the continental reply³ to the familar and acclaimed work of Jeremias published in this country in 1960. This cogent investigation of Professor Aland assesses once more the body of evidence that Jeremias presented, adds to it in certain respects, interprets it differently in not a few cases, and draws from it some quite different conclusions. Even this is not the end of the story. The controversy goes on. A translation of a rejoinder by Jeremias is in preparation.

But for the moment, back to Aland. Whereas Jeremias works forward from the New Testament to the fourth century, Aland adopts the wiser procedure of driving backward from the third century period where infant baptism is plainly established. This movement from the light to the shadows makes possible a more sensitive handling of the historical evidence. It also tends to nullify certain sharp distinctions made by Jeremias, while accentuating others he has tended to ignore. Doubt is cast on the applicability to post-New Testament times of a division between "missionary" baptism and baptism of children born of Christian parents. On the other hand, the danger of confusing "infant" baptism and "child" baptism is clearly revealed.

Towards the middle of the fourth century there is evidence of the postponement of baptism in many circles. Jeremias understands this to be a significant but temporary crisis produced by the recognition of Christianity as the religion of the state. But it is the argument of Aland that this was but the flowering of a practice the roots of which lie prior to the Constantinian settlement. Infant baptism emerges at the end of the second century. The growth of the Christian community is a partial explanation. More important is the growth of the conviction that even a Christian child is born not in "innocence" but in "sin."

It may be that this more fairly represents the probabilities of the situation. What does seem clear is that the practice of infant baptism is early, but that it cannot confidently be traced to the first century and the New Testament. Is this important? Surely the theological issue is the significant one. For us infant baptism may be a direct implication of the Gospel. This, indeed, is Aland's conclusion.

Substantially he is right. Our concern is not with doing today what was done yesterday; it is with Gospel truth. Or it ought to be. Yet it is not quite that simple. We have our criterion, at once Scriptural and theological. Our doctrine, that is to say, is in a curious way tied to a certain segment of history. Is it an uneasy sense of this fact that lures exponents of infant baptism inexorably back to the New Testament, drives them to every shift of exegesis in order that somehow the actual practice of this rite may be deduced or uncovered in Scriptural times?

Let me put it another way. The Anglican church, with its recognition of reason and tradition, increasingly moves towards the adoption of believers' baptism as theologically normative and infant baptism as derivative but defensible. The Church of Scotland and the continental theologians, with their deeper sense of *sola scriptura*, almost defiantly proclaim infant baptism as the theological norm. And there is a logic in that situation. Yet the result may be that while in this matter the Church of England can journey flexibly and receptively to meet the insights of the future, the Church of Scotland may have forged and sharpened a weapon that may ultimately prove self-destructive.

And so from these esoteric matters to a book⁴ which has made the headlines and may be widely read and discussed among ministers. Bultmann, Tillich, and Bonhoeffer have been put in the pot and stirred vigorously and served steaming. The result is an appetising dish, with a captivating aroma. Jaded palates have been tickled and stimulated, but it seems that strong stomachs are needed. Indigestion is already widespread, and some have reached the stage of nausea. It is suggested (to change the metaphor) that here is the next shot in the armoury that recently launched some Cambridge essays, that "Soundings" has been followed by "Depth-charges." And where, scream irate laymen and archbishops, will it all end?

Let us be clear what Dr. Robinson is suggesting. The mental image of God as a supreme entity, a separate being, outside us, beyond us, set over against us, is misleading in crucial respects, meaningless to intelligent modern man, and at times verges on idolatry. God is not a being, one unit among many. He is Being, and must be understood to be the ground of our being. He is known in revelation, in Christ, as love, as personal. So it is that to believe in God means to believe that in personal relationships in love we meet the deepest truth about reality. As we penetrate the finite, conditional relationships of life, we shall recognise as their ground and depth, the unconditional and the infinite which is God. But this depth is not primarily to be sought by any isolated probing of the individual soul. It is "between man and man," in personal encounter, that the depth may be known and that God is found, as the final personal meaning of ultimate concern for "the other" and not as the third party making up the triangle. So the beyond is found precisely in the midst of life, and God is known and relevant not at the critical borders of individual existence but at the centres of truly personal living.

All this has implications which must be worked out in the realms of Christology, of holiness, of morality. Jesus is not a mixture of two disparate elements, divinity and humanity. In scriptural witness he is not strictly seen as God, but as the one who brings God. "What God was the Word was." He points away from himself to

God, and by the complete surrender in obedience, the unqualified displacement of self, he becomes transparent to God, embodying the transcendence of Love. He is the man for others, who in the powerlessness of suffering bears the ultimate and unconditional love that redeems.

In this light we must see that the holy place is in the ordinary relationships of life. The holy lies in the common, as its depth. Holy Communion is the common bearing the unconditional. Diets of worship and seasons of prayer remain necessary; but not as the holy in contrast to the profane, not as the place where God dwells in contrast to the world from which he is removed. In the set times and places, concern is purified, sensitive awareness is cultivated, love's roots are nurtured. Yet this is real only as the heart is driven to it by a constant prayerful meeting with God in the costly relationships of daily existence where everything is given for the neighbour.

Similarly, the overthrow of supernaturalism and the re-interpretation of the transcendent have profound corollaries in the field of traditional morality. The laws of the lawgiver must be exchanged for an ethic of radical responsiveness, a situational ethic, where love alone is ultimate and love's decision mandatory. This is in harmony with the parabolic nature of the teaching of Jesus. It speaks with clear force to problems of marriage and divorce which agitate the churches in our day.

Now if this is fair summary of the cause for which the Bishop of Woolwich is concerned to plead, certain comments may justifiably be made. Most of this is not new. It is, I would suppose, what any reasonably alert minister has been saying to his people for a decade—at least so far as its main emphases are concerned. Further, experiment would suggest that any reasonably alert group of Christian people will on the whole agree with what Dr. Robinson is constrained to assert, whilst doubting the validity of all his denials and suspecting that at many points he is being provocatively one-sided. It is the fringe churchman, the religious occasional attender, who feels that faith is being undermined; and perhaps any mortal blow to his idolatries should be unreservedly welcomed. Of course, Dr. Robinson might object that a general intellectual fog remains, that to accept the truth about holiness, devotion, ethics, while clinging to a concept of God which points in quite other directions, is schizophrenically illogical, and that what may get by within a closed Christian circle is apologetically useless. It may indeed be so.

And if it is, does this book give us the bases of a coherent answer to our predicament? I am not too sure that it does. Ontology is not its strong point. Tillich is often called in to prophecy. But if Tillich is to be invoked, it must be the whole Tillich. For to an unusual degree his is a system which stands as a whole within which each

part is delicately balanced. Lifting illuminating insights from him is always dangerous. His conclusions also follow from his presuppositions. Does Dr. Robinson accept these *in toto*? A compound of Tillich, Bultmann and Bonhoeffer is a delightful mixture; but the three make strange bedfellows. What we have here is not heresy. It may be muddled thinking. Nevertheless, let him who is without sin—or who can do better—cast the first stone.

So what is the minister to do with all this? He has a duty to protect the health of his flock. But most of us are guilty of too much pastoral caution, rather than too little. Intellectually, as well as in all other ways, the church must be prepared to lose its life that the world may live. Risks must be taken. The hour is now; and the *kairos* will not last for ever. But let us be "honest to God" all the way. This is a heady wine, just made for frustrated clergy who want to be revolutionary. God is calling mankind to come of age, but there is a good deal of empirical evidence which suggests that most have a long way to go. We cannot jump from infancy to maturity; we must all pass through the disciplines of childhood and the stresses and uncertainties of adolescence. Yet the goal and the norm are one and the same. Herein lies the continuing pastoral tension; and all the sensitivity of love's discernment is needed to resolve it. Nevertheless, it is good that this book has been written, and better that it is being read.

¹ H. G. Hageman, *Pulpit and Table*. S.C.M. 21s. 1962.

² Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith, and the Consummation*. Lutterworth. 35s. 1962.

³ Kurt Aland, *Did the Early Church baptize infants?* S.C.M. 16s. 1963.

⁴ J. A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God*. S.C.M. 5s. 1963.

N. CLARK