

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>

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

THE
BIBLIOTHECA SACRA.

ARTICLE I.

THE OUTLOOK IN THEOLOGY.¹

BY PROFESSOR EDWARD LEWIS CURTIS, PH.D., D.D.

THE subject of the outlook or whither in respect to the Bible and Christian doctrine is often depressing, since old notions once held quite essential to evangelical Christianity seem now to be crumbling, and the cry is sometimes heard, "They have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him." We ought, however, to have no fear for the future.

"Our little systems have their day;
They have their day and cease to be;
They are but broken lights of thee,
And thou, O Lord, art more than they."

A living, thinking church cannot go backward. Not all churches, however, think or have liberty of thought. Sometimes old forms of belief become incorporated into the very structure of a denomination, so that a future growth in the knowledge and wisdom of God is apparently denied to its membership. This is the condition of the Greek and Roman Catholic churches. These churches have ceased to make any real contributions to religious

¹ An address delivered before the General Association of Connecticut, 1898.

thought. This we sometimes fear will be the fate of the Presbyterian Church of this country, but never, we trust, of our own Congregational body. Liberty of thought, intellectual and spiritual progress, have always been the glory of the church whose membership has been honored by such names as Charles G. Finney of Oberlin, Nathaniel Taylor of New Haven, Horace Bushnell of Hartford, Edwards A. Park of Andover, and Henry Ward Beecher. Some of these names strike one now as those of staunch conservatives, but in their own day they represented forward movements in theology. New England Congregationalism bequeathed largely to the Presbyterian Church also its progressive elements, giving that church such men as Henry B. Smith and Roswell D. Hitchcock, whose work in setting the direction of Union Seminary has now been repudiated by the Presbyterian Church.

Growth in Christian thought, however, is measured by centuries rather than decades. The present conclusions of the Higher Criticism, in spite of numerous changes in detail, were in their essential particulars voiced by Eichhorn and DeWette and other scholars at the beginning of this century, and dominant features of the new theology may be found in the writings of Schleiermacher of eighty years ago. Horace Bushnell and Frederick W. Robertson fifty years ago were proclaiming much also that even now we call new forms of thought. The next fifty years then, without a sudden break, but with a development as gradual as the passage of a bud into a flower, will probably witness a construction in Christian doctrine along the same lines in which it has been moving during the past fifty years.

In respect to the Bible we are in the midst of a period of historical and literary study. This study or criticism has about finished its work upon the Old Testament. Its familiar conclusions respecting the date, composition,

and historical value of these Scriptures need no rehearsal at this time. In details they may be modified, and furnish questions of debate among specialists; but the general verdict of the Higher Criticism respecting the Old Testament will stand. The opposing school appears a dissolving force, since it produces no commanding literature; for the encyclopedias, Bible dictionaries, and commentaries issued by the leading publishers of scholarly religious literature present almost entirely the new views. The attacks upon special features of them from an archæological point of view have amounted to nothing; and, indeed, in these attacks have been given reconstructions of Old Testament history and literature—fundamentally the same as those of the Higher Critics.

The outcome of this criticism has been to bring the Old Testament Scriptures somewhat to the level of other ancient writings in respect to their formal composition, historical and scientific contents, and yet to leave them incomparably removed from all other writings as a record of divine revelation and a promise of redemption. This revelation and promise, with its laws of human conduct, will be emphasized more and more, and what has happily been called a *highest* criticism will always preserve to the church the Old Testament at its full value as a word of God.

In respect to the New Testament, no such finality of critical results has been reached. Here the outlook is for a continued controversy for some years; for criticism must have as free a field in the New Testament as in the Old. Through this controversy, judging especially from the recent work of Professor McGiffert,¹ the full genuineness of some sayings attributed to Christ and the apostles will be questioned, and doubt will be cast upon the full historicity

¹ *A History of Christianity in the Apostolic Age.* By Arthur Cushman McGiffert, Ph.D., D.D., Washburn Professor of Church History in the Union Theological Seminary, New York. New York. 1897.

of certain portions of the New Testament, such as the opening chapters of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and the earlier part of Acts. Such a result is inevitable, unless there is a backward movement to the old view of an infallible historical inspiration, and this seems impossible. Along with and after this higher criticism of the New Testament, we may expect, what I have already called in respect to the Old Testament, a *highest* criticism, giving more distinctly and comprehensively the divine message of the New Testament. This work has indeed already begun. We are finding in the New Testament a gospel for society as well as for the individual. The fullness of Christ's idea of the kingdom of God also has not yet been attained.

But, in spite of these outlooks for a highest constructive religious criticism of the Bible, we must recognize that the results of biblical criticism, taken as a whole, are radical and revolutionary. They have destroyed the infallibility of both the Old and the New Testament, and at first blush this looks as though Protestant Christianity were at an end; for Protestant Christianity has been supposed to be entirely based upon an infallible Bible. The underlying Protestant idea, however, is not that Christianity is based upon the Bible, but upon a divine revelation. The adage, "The Bible, and the Bible only, is the religion of Protestantism," is true only when we make the Bible and Divine or supernatural Revelation convertible terms. This has been the usual notion. The Bible alone has been recognized as the word of God. A sharp line of distinction has been drawn between the Bible and all other sources of divine knowledge. The primary evidence for this distinction has been found in the miracle. "Miracles, as far as we can see," said the late President Hopkins in his famous "Evidences of Christianity," "are the only means by which it would be possible for God to authenticate a

communication to man.”¹ This statement, it is true, does not seem exactly in accord with the teachings of Scripture, or with the older Protestant position, which made primary the testimony of the Holy Spirit. But it has been the current view. The fundamental positions of revealed religion have usually been stated about as follows: “The evidence of divine or supernatural revelation is the miracle. The miracle *par excellence* is seen in the resurrection of Christ. This resurrection guarantees the divine personality of Jesus. Jesus authenticates the Old Testament, and by his promise to his apostles the New Testament. Canonicity corresponds to apostolicity. The Bible comes to us, then, with the seal of divine authority as an infallible book, because Christ promised the spirit of truth to the apostles and because all statements of Old Testament Scriptures are received in the New Testament as true. All the facts of Christian theology are found within the Bible. We believe in the inspiration of the Scriptures, the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the vicarious atonement, justification by faith, eternal salvation and eternal punishment, primarily because they are taught in the Scriptures. The only differences that can arise between believers are differences in the interpretation or the understanding of the Bible. Doctrinal modification can arise solely through modification in exegesis.” These are the essential positions of the older orthodoxy. *Divine revelation recorded in the Scriptures authenticated by a miracle furnishes our belief.*

This scheme or platform, however, is proving unacceptable. Historical and literary criticism showing that the Bible is not infallible assails it on one hand, and philosophical criticism rejecting the fundamental position that a divine supernatural revelation is primarily authenticated by a miracle, assails it on another hand.

¹ Lectures on the Evidences of Christianity (Boston, 1846), p. 62.

The view emphasizing the miracle as the primary evidence of divine revelation is becoming untenable for two reasons: First, it seems unacceptable, that moral and spiritual truth should rest ultimately for its verification upon the senses, that the knowledge of what is right should depend upon the knowledge of what has happened. Secondly, it seems unacceptable that the higher disclosures of God should come through a break in the uniformity of nature, rather than in the uniformity itself. Only to the savage and untutored mind will a prodigy in nature manifest God more clearly than the orderly movements of the heavenly bodies. Hence, this fundamental view that a divine supernatural revelation requires a miracle or break in the uniformity of nature for its authentication, is quietly being rejected. Professor Samuel Harris, for example, calls it a misconception of revelation "that it can be manifest among men only by abrupt interruption into the fixed course of the universe, interrupting its continuity, uniformity, and law."¹ Professor Charles Mellen Tyler of Cornell says, "Religion to retain the respect of scientific reason must concede that a disclosure of the divine mind and heart is best achieved through the uniformity of natural law and the inviolable constitution of the soul."² Professor James Denney quotes with approval the words of Robertson Smith when he says, "If I am asked why I receive Scripture as the word of God, and as the only perfect rule of faith and life, I answer with the fathers of the Protestant Church, Because the Bible is the only record of the redeeming love of God, because in the Bible alone I find God drawing near to man in Christ Jesus, and declaring to us in him his will for our salvation. And this record I know to be true by the witness of his Spirit in my heart, whereby I am assured that none other than God him-

¹ God the Creator and Lord of All (New York, 1896), Vol. i. p. 44.

² Bases of Religious Belief (New York, 1897), p. 237.

self is able to speak such words unto my soul.”¹ God likewise is found revealed in Jesus Christ, not because he rose from the dead, but from his unique God-revealing personality,—a personality, however, which finds its expression in his resurrection, and guarantees the full value of that resurrection; so that Easter day can never lose its meaning, and the words “he has risen” must ever remain potentially true.

From this point of view, it is evident that we have nothing to fear from historical and literary criticism as a reasonable science. Such errors as may be found within the Bible do not destroy our religion. For, beyond the great, underlying, historical facts which no one questions, the realm of faith is distinct from that of historical and literary criticism. Historical and literary facts are not verified by the Holy Spirit. They make no appeal to our moral and spiritual nature.

This position, which has given us a new apprehension of the character of divine revelation, and allows a free field for criticism, involves no denial of the miraculous. The possibility and even the probability of miracles are freely granted, revealing the absolute liberty of the Creator within his sphere of activity, just as man has similar liberty within his own sphere. “Miracles may be held to be outflashes of psychic activity from the realm of eternal reason not inharmonious with that activity which appears in the regimented phenomena of the world.” “They may be fortissimo notes in the great harmony of God’s spiritual disclosures of himself.”

This position does not set aside the Bible as the supreme authority for Christian doctrine. The Bible still retains all the authority it in fact ever exercised, i.e., the author-

¹ See *Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by James Hastings (Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York, 1898), Vol. i. p. 298.

² *Bases of Religious Belief*, p. 238.

ity of the truth which it contains. "It gives us the knowledge of Christ without which Christian theology would not exist, and enables us to look with Christian eyes upon the experiences and problems of religion. Both formally and informally it is our constant guide in exploring the great field of religion and theology." But man and the universe are all sources of theology. "Right understanding of the facts of human nature is the foundation of right conceptions concerning God." "The phenomena of nature make a real contribution to the knowledge of God, and theology must learn from them."¹

This is the new view, and on this view will the theology of the future be constructed. To some this is an alarming outlook. The Professor of Theology at Princeton Seminary speaks of this tendency as "*de-christianizing theology.*"² Practically, however, there will be no violent break with the teachings of the past, because the Scriptures contain the highest moral and religious truth, and from their contents they will always hold the supreme position of authority. The gain, on the other hand, will be very great, because thus in our theological thinking we are brought in close sympathy with all humanity, and as we sing,

"There's a wideness in God's mercy,
Like the wideness of the sea";

so we can also sing,

"There's a wideness in God's speaking,
Like the wideness of the race."

Wherever there has been an aspiration after God, wherever man has prayed, there has God in some way answered. This makes all religions akin,—and affirms God to have been the same yesterday and to-day, fulfilling unto all men the gracious promise, "Ask, and it shall be given you;

¹ An Outline of Christian Theology, by William N. Clarke (Cambridge, 1894), pp. 44, 46, 47.

² Professor B. B. Warfield in the *Homiletic Review*, March, 1898.

seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you." Such a view, instead of de-christianizing theology, *re-christianizes* it.

The source of Christian theology or Christian doctrine, thus, is not only widened; but divine revelation under this view must be regarded as progressive. It did not cease when the apostles died. "On the contrary," to quote again Professor Samuel Harris, "we are living on the highest plane which God's self-revelation has yet attained, under the same revelation as of old continued, and progressively amplified in adapting it to new times and conditions. Christians in every generation trusting in God may say, 'God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined into our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Cor. iv. 6). The revelation in Christ known to us historically is perpetually renewed to us, being illumined by the Spirit of God shining in our hearts, and quickening us to receive and apply it. 'He shall glorify me, for he shall receive of mine, and shall declare it unto you' (John xvi. 14)."¹ Practically this has always been realized in the Christian Church. The Bible practically has usually been applied according to the Christian consciousness. The Divine Spirit has led the church thus, from one period to another, into a higher and better apprehension of divine truth. Even when the old formulas are preserved, the ideas and their interpretation change. "We spend our lives, consciously or unconsciously," says one, "in putting new wine into old bottles. There is not a single dogma dating from two or three centuries back which is repeated in the same meaning as in its origination. We still speak of the inspiration of the prophets and of the apostles, of the atonement and of the Trinity, of the divinity of Christ, of miracles; but, whether in a greater or less degree, we under-

¹ God Creator and Lord of All, Vol. i. p. 110.

stand them differently from our fathers. The river flows on even when the waters are stagnant at the surface.

“But the elasticity of words and formulas has a limit. There comes a time when new wine causes the old bottles to break, when it becomes necessary for the church to make new vessels to receive it. Then new words appear in languages, and new dogmas in theology. It is thus that the dogmas of justification by faith and of universal priesthood came into prominence in the sixteenth century. New dogmas, do we call them? Rather we should say, old ones rising with new energy.”¹

Are we now in such a period? Are the old bottles breaking, and is the church called upon to make new vessels? This is the evident feeling of the eloquent Sabatier. Certainly we have changed already the contents of certain vessels,—those of creation, inspiration, the atonement, divine retribution, those even of the deity of Christ and the Trinity of God. We do not exactly understand these terms as our fathers did. We are stripping off the accretions of past ages. It is true, also, that we are hesitating exactly what to put in their places. No one perhaps can definitely state what the new definitions or doctrines will be. Perhaps they will never be drawn very rigidly. We are becoming empiricists even in our theological reasoning. Religious truth, we are beginning to find, cannot be wholly expressed by intellectual formulas, for religion appeals to something else than the pure intellect; it grasps the soul by something else than a syllogism. Our conceptions, however, will be positive: there will be a real creation, a real inspiration, a real atonement, a real retribution, a real deity of our Lord, and a real triune Godhead; for, while the intellectual and spiritual horizon of man may widen, the seed thoughts of revelation are permanent. The needs of the human heart also ever remain the same, and there

¹ *The Vitality of Christian Dogmas*, by A. Sabatier (London, 1898), p. 44 f.

is something in evangelical religion which meets those needs. That something will always be retained. Our test of finding it will be our Christian experience or consciousness,—an experience or consciousness covering every faculty of man, his reason as well as his moral nature. We learn where nutrition lies in the products of the soil by observing scientifically what nature craves and what nature assimilates; so, likewise, shall we learn where the bread of life will be found by observing the craving for, and the application of, doctrine. The hunger of the soul both intellectual and spiritual must be satisfied. The divine life must be imparted or quickened. All doctrine is subordinate to this end and God, we may be sure, will grant this doctrine. The truth for the day in its day. "What man is there of you, who, if his son ask bread, will give him a stone; or if he ask a fish, will give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give good things to them that ask him?"