Historical and Biblical Theology: A Reply to Alan Richardson

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THE subject of Alan Richardson's recent article, "Historical Theology and Biblical Theology,"[1] is of importance and interest: and the contention of the author that we are "not to allow the witness of the Bible to be set aside in the interests of non-biblical assumptions" places him, in my opinion, firmly on the side of the angels. But some of his other contentions seem to me to be most peculiar indeed: and the steps of some of his argumentation are, to say the least, faltering and erratic.

In the early part of the article Dr. Richardson discusses two cases and from the discussion draws the conclusion "that there is no such thing as historical theology, if by that term is meant a reconstruction of the theology of any given period that is objectively independent of the investigator's personal point of view." I believe that this conclusion is not warranted by his discussion and also that it is false.

The first case which Dr. Richardson examines is the change of opinion in regard to the book of Ecclesiastes. Until recently, he alleges, it was commonly maintained that this book represented a distinctly Greek type of pessimism and scepticism which is at variance with the Hebraic outlook of the Bible as a whole. Now, however, it can be seen to be thoroughly biblical. If this is true, and for the sake of the argument I assume that it is true, then we are confronted by a conflict of opinion, and it is of interest to note the two different causes which may account for this conflict.

When "A" says that "X" is non-biblical and "B" says that "X" is thoroughly biblical, there are at least two possible and different reasons for the conflict. The first is this: "A" and "B" have exactly the same understanding of the meaning of "X", but a significantly different understanding of what it is to be biblical. "A" and "B" are then saying to one another: "I agree with your interpretation of what Ecclesiastes says; our dispute is not about that; it is about the application of the word '*biblical*.'" The second is this: "A" and "B" have a significantly different understanding of the meaning of "X," but exactly the same understanding of what it means to be biblical. In this situation "A" and "B" are saying to one another: "I agree with your understanding of the concept '*biblical*'; our dispute is not about that; it is over the interpretation of what Ecclesiastes says."

Now it would seem that Dr. Richardson holds that the real reason for the conflict is the first of these two. He writes: "But today in our changed climate of opinion, it is easier to see that all these critical estimates and conclusions are based on the fact that the insights of the Preacher contradict

1. *Canadian Journal of Theology*, I, pp. 157–167.

the assumptions of theological liberal optimism." This would seem to mean that the change of opinion has been occasioned by a change of opinion regarding the meaning of the term "biblical;" and, for the sake of the argument, I shall asume that that is so. But if that is so, what does it illustrate? Dr. Richardson's answer is: "the subjectivism of the so-called historical approach." I suggest that it does not illustrate that at all. It illustrates something quite different, namely, that two investigators who belong to a different theological climate of opinion may be in complete agreement regarding the interpretation of a book. And that fact—if indeed it has anything to do with the question of historical theology—would seem not to lend support to, but rather to weaken, the conclusion that there can be no reconstruction of the theology of any given period that is objectively independent of the investigator's point of view.

The second case which Dr. Richardson examines is Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament.* The assumption which he discovers underlying this work is that "by the methods of scientific historical criticism, it is possible to lay bare the successive stages by which the Catholic religion of the second and subsequent centuries was developed:" i.e., that by the methods of scientific historical criticism it is possible to reconstruct the original Christian kerygma and then to show how it became overlaid by accretions from a foreign source. This assumption, he says, is regarded by Bultmann as self-obvious and is in consequence never by him called in question. Dr. Richardson thinks that it can and ought to be called in question, and the points which he proceeds to make are intended to do just that; to show, in the words already quoted, that it is impossible by historical methods to achieve "a reconstruction of the theology of any given period that is objectively independent of the investigator's personal point of view."

It is, I think, of the first importance to notice that the point immediately made by Dr. Richardson does not call in question the assumption stated above, although clearly he thinks that it does. He alleges that Bultmann's reconstruction is subjective and uncritical, and that may be true. To say that, however, is not enough. What Dr. Richardson needs to show is that it is subjective and uncritical because the historical method is employed. If it is subjective and uncritical because the historical method is not consistently employed, then this is no argument against the historical method. It is necessary to ask then, why in Dr. Richardson's opinion the result is subjective and uncritical. The answer is explicit; "because it is based upon a few simple dogmas of the modern mind," including the dogma that miracles do not happen. That, I suggest, is decisive for the issue in question. What is here claimed is that Bultmann's reconstruction of the kerygma is guided not simply by considerations of a historical nature; but that it is, on the contrary, controlled by a determination not to admit as part of the kerygma anything that is unacceptable to Bultmann the theologian. It is governed, in other words, by a theological preoccupation, and that may

very well be a phenomenon frequently found in the work of theologically minded historians when engaged in the study of Christian origins. But this, of course, is no argument against the historical approach. It is no fault of the historical method that other interests may overwhelm it. Nor is one justified in generalising from this situation; for there is no reason to believe that the fault of Bultmann is necessarily characteristic of all historiography. There is, on the contrary, reason to suppose that it is not; for most historians who are seeking to reconstruct the thought of an age are not committed to, and their work is therefore not governed by, a legislative principle that that thought is true.

It is, however, when Dr. Richardson comes to deal with the topic of historiography in general that his most striking pronouncements are made. "All history," he says, "is somebody's history—Gibbon's or Macaulay's or Trevelyan's;" and he intends this in a sense stronger than that which would merely exclude ghost-writers. He means, in other words, not only that Gibbon and no-one else wrote Gibbon's history, but also that there is something of Gibbon in Gibbon's history, just as generally there is something of the author in every historical work. And perhaps something like this has to be admitted. But, surely, from the fact that every historian is writing his own history in the sense just given, it does not follow that every historian is writing about himself, that "all true historical writing is autobiographical or is self-portraiture." It does not follow, and it is not true; for, to take an example, even if it has to be granted that what we get in Macaulay's essay on Clive is Clive as seen through the eyes of Macaulay, it is surely Clive as seen through the eyes of Macaulay and not Macaulay as seen through the eyes of Macaulay that we get there.

The above is, however, only a part of Dr. Richardson's thesis on historiography in general. The other part is no less striking. This is the claim that "it is this personal quality of the historian's work which gives it its interest and value," "what makes it so fascinating and important." Now, while certainly it may be the case that it is this personal quality which gives to the historian's work some kind of value, surely it is not that, but something else, which gives it its value or makes it important as a work of history. Dr. Richardson does seem to think, however, that it is this which gives it value and importance as a work of history; and when we put the two parts of his thesis together, and state it in terms of a concrete example, the position which emerges from what he says is this: Macaulay's history of Clive is a good history of Clive precisely in proportion as it is really the autobiography of Macaulay. This is a somewhat bizarre contention.

It would be less than fair to conclude, however, without acknowledging that there are statements on historiography in Dr. Richardson's article quite different from the position examined above, and that these may very well be closer to the truth. I am inclined to think also that there may be a sense of the expression "historical theology" such that it would be true to

say that there is no such thing as historical theology. Only, that sense is different from Dr. Richardson's sense; and the reasons are quite different from Dr. Richardson's reasons. I am inclined to think that historical research can neither prove nor disprove the affirmation that Jesus is the Christ; and so, if historical theology is defined as involving such a claim for historical research, then I am inclined to think that it is bogus.