Biblical and Systematic Theology

DONALD MATHERS

BIBLICAL and Systematic Theology have not always been distinguished one from the other as they are today. At many of our older universities there are chairs of Divinity whose occupants were formerly expected to teach something which was neither exactly Biblical nor Systematic Theology but, in a vague way, both. The two subjects were naïvely identified, and it was only later that they fell apart. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the influence of rationalistic criticism imparted to the special Biblical study a tone of hostility to the general theological one. From its beginnings until recently Biblical Theology has generally attempted to be impartial, non-dogmatic, scientific, historical and strongly critical of traditional orthodoxy, but in our own time the words Biblical Theology have come to represent almost the opposite intention. While recognizing the value of objective, scientific study, the Biblical Theologian of today wishes to interpret the Bible as the canonical document of a believing community in which he stands, and to recognize that it was written in and for that community. He sees the Bible as a book that demands a verdict and to which he wishes to give a believing and obedient Christian verdict.

Biblical Theology has in fact turned out to be a poor instrument for the attack on dogmatics, and systematic theologians are bound to welcome the renewed interest of Biblical scholars in traditional theological questions. But they are bound also to recognize that it makes necessary a definition of boundaries and a discussion of the mode of cooperation. It is unlikely that there can be any return to the old "Divinity"; certainly not if that means a return to the innocence of the pre-critical period. Earlier Protestants were able to dispose of this problem with a wave of the hand since they believed that the Bible itself contained a systematic theology. W. B. Pope, the Canadian-born Methodist theologian, could still say blithely in 1875 that "when the development of divine doctrine ceased, the development of human dogma began,"[1] but contemporary Protestants cannot unload the problem so easily. We do not regard the Biblical revelation as being the transmission of divine doctrine, even a developing divine doctrine. Nor do we suppose that the propositions of theology are always of the same logical order as the highly diverse materials of the Biblical documents. We do indeed seem to believe that in some sense Biblical Theology is logically and temporally prior to Systematic Theology. We talk of Systematic Theology building on the foundations of Biblical Theology or using its "assured results," but we know also that Prof. Norman Porteous was uncomfortably close to the truth when he wrote in a recent paper of how the Biblical Theologian sometimes seems

1. W. B. Pope, *Compendium of Theology* (London, 1880), vol. 1, p. 230.

to tip the confused and confusing results of his study over the wall into the garden of the Systematic Theologian to let him make such sense of them as he can.[2]

One historical change that underlies this situation is the development of the critical study of the Biblical documents. But another, which is also of importance, is the philosophical criticism of rationalist metaphysics which we associate with the name of Immanuel Kant. It is the effect of this philosophical revolution on the relation of Biblical to Systematic Theology that I wish to examine.

Pre-critical metaphysics was accustomed to define itself by the oracular phrase "the science of being as such" or "the science of pure being." Its intention was by rational means to establish propositions whose object was not any particular being but simply being. The definition of theology which would correspond to this would be that theology is "the science of God" whose intention is to establish, either by rational means, or on the basis of revelation, propositions about God as He is in Himself. Traditional, pre-critical metaphysics therefore finds as its counterpart a Natural Theology conceived as the philosophic establishment of truths about God, and Revealed Theology conceived as the exposition of truths about God not capable of being established by human reason but transmitted by God to His Church in revelation. On this view, the function of Systematic Theology would be the coordination into one system of propositions about God derived from various sources, and for this purpose propositions from Biblical Theology and dogmas of the Church (both regarded as revealed truths) were treated as being of the same logical order as truths established by reason.

It must be accounted one of the curiosities of the history of Protestant Theology that classical metaphysics survived the Reformation at all. Luther and Calvin ought to have killed it and perhaps believed that they had done so. But whatever the reason, it was not the Reformers, but Kant who dealt the death blow to speculative metaphysics in Protestant theology, and he did so, not in the name of revelation, but in the name of natural science.

Everyone knows how Kant, in his *Critique of Pure Reason* denied that God could be an object of knowledge, denied the legitimacy of the proofs of God's existence, and allowed to God only the tenuous existence of an Idea of Reason. People today often speak of God as a psychological projection, the embodiment of our felt desires and needs. Kant gave God the status of a logical projection, something which men can never know but can never stop thinking about, a question which men must ask but cannot answer.[3]

No one need wonder that Kant's teaching caused a scandal among conservative Protestants. What is remarkable is that it came to be all but universally accepted in the Protestant world within a generation or two, so that people might wish to go "back to Kant" or "on from Kant" but could not

2. *Oudtestamentische Studien*, VIII, p. 3.
3. *Critique of Pure Reason*, B xxviii ff.

ignore him or hope to return behind him, and that Kant himself even came (however misleadingly) to be called "the Protestant philosopher." Prof. Gilson might comment that the Protestants had no alternative; that there are only two pure philosophical positions, that of Aquinas and that of Kant, and if you will not learn from St. Thomas to Kant you must go.[4] But there is another possible explanation: that however desiccated Kant's adult religion may have been, however unacceptable to the church the substitute theology which he formulated, yet he was brought up a Protestant and there was something not inappropriate to the Protestant understanding of things in the limitation that he placed upon pure, theoretic reason. He found it necessary to deny reason to make room for *glaube*, and if *glaube* meant for him something very different from what it meant for his neighbour Hamann or his Pietist mother and father, it is not in the least difficult to suppose that he knew what that difference was. There is in fact a real parallel between Kant's attack on metaphysics and the Reformation attacks on natural theology. However else they may differ, Kant and Luther agree that no knowledge of God can be gained by inference from nature.[5] If Kant believed that it was an offence against scientific decorum to seek to extend the field of human knowledge to include God, Luther regarded it as blasphemy to attempt a "theology of glory." The same is true for Calvin. It is not simply sin and the fall that limit our knowledge of God. If He is to be known to us, He must accommodate Himself to our finite comprehension. "It is no accident," says Edward Dowey in his fine book on Calvin, "that the *Institutes*, from the first edition to the last, opens with the category of knowledge, 'the knowledge of God and ourselves,' not speculations about being or existence. Calvin is here a kind of Kant, an epistemologist not a metaphysician, with reference to God and the world."[6]

If Kant destroyed traditional metaphysics in the Protestant world, he likewise destroyed the old Divinity as a unified study. It has never been successfully practised since, but has fallen apart into Biblical Criticism, Biblical Theology, Systematic Theology, Philosophy of Religion, Apologetics and so on, studies whose interrelations have perplexed theologians for a century and a half. We are still fighting the battles into which Kant led us, and it is not certain that we have even successfully managed to change the ground which he chose for the combat. The status of Theology, like that of Metaphysics, is still a matter of dispute, and if my analogy is worth while, the fate of the one can throw light upon that of the other.

Kant's negative work was decisive. He destroyed traditional metaphysics, but if he knew how metaphysics was to be reconstructed after his attack, then he kept the secret to himself. There is a legend that while he was writing the *Critique of Pure Reason* he promised his friends that it would be followed by his Metaphysics, but that when they asked him to make good his

4. E. Gilson, *God and Philosophy, New Haven*, 1941, p. 112.
5. P. S. Watson, *Let God be God* (London, 1947), p. 78.
6. E. A. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (New York, 1952), p. 8.

promise he replied that the *Critique* itself was all the metaphysics they would get—that he had written his metaphysics under the new name of Transcendental Analytic. Metaphysics henceforth was to be understood as the analysis of the presuppositions underlying ordinary scientific activity. It was in this sense that the Positivists understood Kant.

What is the theological equivalent of this positivism? May I suggest that it is Fundamentalism? The only way to find a theological counterpart of Kant's Transcendental Analytic is to insist that the Holy Scriptures have the status of science—that they provide knowledge of the same epistemological order as our knowledge of the physical world. If this can be granted, then the problem of Biblical and Systematic Theology is easily solved: Theology consists of the analysis of the religious presuppositions of the Biblical documents. So far as it is able to order them, it is both Biblical and Systematic at the same time. This, it seems to me is the fundamentalist attitude to theology, and to call *it* a positivism of revelation is to throw some light on the combination of dogmatic certainty, agnosticism about problems which scripture does not solve, and refusal to speculate, which characterizes fundamentalist thought.

The analogy, however, offers one more spark of illumination. The greatest enemy which scientific positivism has had to face is historicism, and the same may be said of theological positivism. When Kant made his transcendental analysis of the presuppositions of science, he believed that the task could be completed once for all. But Collingwood and others have argued that what he analyzed were the absolute presuppositions, not of science as such, but of Newtonian science, and that since science is a living and growing thing, other constellations of presuppositions can likewise be laid bare by historical analysis.[7] This historicism poses a serious, if not fatal, problem for theological positivism. If different strata of religious ideas can be convincingly shown to exist in the Biblical documents, then the whole idea of a theology which is the permanent expression of Christian truth, at once the faith of the Bible and the historic faith of the church, falls to the ground.

But Collingwood's historicist revision of Kant raises a problem for those who are not fundamentalists. If it is true, as he argued, that Absolute Presuppositions cannot be propounded but can only be presupposed, and that the metaphysician's (or the theologian's) business is not to propound them, but to propound the proposition that this or that one of them is or has been presupposed,[8] then there is no possibility of making Biblical Theology nourish the faith of the church. If Collingwood is right, theologizing as a constructive activity is impossible. Theology can only be an historical study, analyzing the beliefs of the Biblical writers or such men as Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin and Schleiermacher, and Systematic Theology, in so far as it is scientific, cannot be anything more than the analysis of the beliefs of the church in the recent past. It may be analytic but it cannot be con-

7. R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford, 1940).
8. Op. cit., p. 33.

structive. It cannot help the church to formulate her policies or her proclamation. The present is as unknowable as the future, and all we can do is to act it out. The one theology that we cannot know is our own—only to God and our successors can it be evident.

If there is any truth in this argument, it may help to explain one curious feature of the demythologizing controversy. Why are Bultmann and his colleagues so anxious to move at one bound from exegesis to existence, or at least from Biblical Theology to preaching, without pausing to nod to the Systematic Theologians on the way? Because, on historicist principles, Systematic Theology has no help to offer. It can only invite you to break your journey from the 1st century to the 20th by stopping off in the 13th or 16th or 19th, thus involving you in two processes of demythologizing instead of one. At this end of the journey there can be no reception committee of "systematikers," only the hard, pioneering tasks of Christian existence today. On this view, it is only when others have fought the church's battles, proclaimed her faith and done her work, and only when the dust of conflict has died down, that the Systematic Theologian can begin his essentially analytic and historical task of stating in a detached, second-hand way, what it is that has been going on.

If Kant was held to have proved that the object of Metaphysics could not be Being-as-such, and the object of Theology could not be God-as-such, since neither God nor Being present themselves as objects of our experience, he bequeathed to his successors the problem of discovering what the true object of Theology might be. I have sugested that one answer which was given was that the object of Theology is not God, but the Biblical writings together with the later documents of the Christian faith. One implication of this answer is that scientific theology can never be more than an historical study. The second answer to which I wish to point has almost the opposite characteristic, for it defines Systematic Theology in such a way that it can refer only to the present and never in any serious way to the past.

Schleiermacher defines Dogmatic Theology as "the science which systematizes the doctrine prevalent in a Christian church at a given time,"[9] and the reason for his definition is indicated by the popular title of his system: *Glaubenslehre*, the doctrine of faith. Schleiermacher had seen that, after Kant, Systematic Theology could not avoid giving a direct answer to the question "What is the object of theology?" and he had answered "Not God, but human faith." "We shall exhaust," he said, "the whole compass of Christian doctrine if we consider the facts of the religious self consciousness" (§29). "All propositions which the system of Christian doctrine has to establish can be regarded . . . as descriptions of human states" (§30). "We much declare the description of human states of mind to be the fundamental dogmatic form" (*ibid.*). Propositions about the constitution of the world or about divine modes of action are only permissible in theology in so far as they can be developed out of propositions describing human states

9. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (E.T. Edinburgh, 1928), §19.

of mind. "Christian doctrines are accounts of the Christian religious affections set forth in speech" (§15).

On this basis, Schleiermacher was well able to reconstruct Systematic Theology, and indeed to breathe into it an energy which it had not known for generations. But what of its relation to the Bible, and was Biblical Theology in any sense possible on Schleiermacher's principles? In his description of the *Kirchenfürst*, the Prince of the Church, his ideal church leader, Schleiermacher gave great place to Biblical studies. "Every specialist in exegesis must be able to construe the text of the canon critically, while every theologian, whether specializing in exegesis or no, must master the principles and methods of historic criticism."[10] The Church, he said, must develop an expert knowledge of ancient languages among its own theologians. Exegesis he considered to be a permanent discipline, and he was himself a notable exegete, but between exegesis and theology a great gulf seems to be fixed. Despite his rich knowledge of the past, Schleiermacher can find little place for history in his theology. To him the past seems sometimes to be a dead past. When he speaks, for instance of the place that scripture and the historic confessions of the Church have to play in the formation of the dogmatic system he makes it plain that they cannot provide any of the content of theological propositions (§27). They are simply a test, a norm, though a sufficient norm (§131), which operates in a peculiarly external way. "Every system of doctrine . . . must strive to attach itself (*anzuschliessen*) to this history." The witness of scripture seems in no way to be unique, for "Scripture . . . is only one special instance of the witness to Christ (§127).

Schleiermacher may be said to have saved Systematic Theology, but only by losing Biblical Theology. He escaped the crisis about the object of theology which Kant had precipitated by making the religious consciousness its object. But in so doing he fell into subjectivism. I do not think that Schleiermacher can rightly be accused of being an individualist: he had a prominent place for the church in his thinking, but his theology is still subjective, for the church speaks to itself about itself. The church is never addressed, as Barth would say, from beyond itself by any word of God. It is imprisoned in immanence.

The third answer to Kant's problem about the object of metaphysics or of theology to which I wish to point is Hegel's. No one with any commitments to Biblical Theology is likely to think well of Professor Hegel. He is likely instead to be a chosen enemy. Hegel has also the misfortune of being the skeleton in the cupboard of the Systematic Theologians who often find it necessary to explain that if by any chance they should be discovered to be going about their work in a systematic way at least it is not Hegel's system which inspires them. But if Hegel was wrong, he was impressively wrong, and has indeed become a world-historical figure upon whom we must all take bearings. He solved Kant's problem about Metaphysics and Theology with breathtaking ease. By agreeing that the human mind makes its con-

10. Schleiermacher, *Soliloquies* (Chicago, 1926), p. 158 f.

tribution in the process of knowing, and by going on to assert that reality as a whole is mind, and that the human mind is the operation of the divine spirit in man, he opened the door to speculative theology on the grandest scale. "Human reason is the divine in man, and Spirit, so far as it is the Spirit of God is not a spirit beyond the stars, beyond the world. On the contrary, God is present, omnipresent, and exists as Spirit in all spirits. God is a living God, who is active and working."[11]

What concerns us is Hegel's attitude to Biblical and Systematic Theology. Everyone knows that Hegel's programme for saving theology was to elevate it to the dignity of a philosophic study, and he has the harshest words to speak to those who reduce theology to a historical study, whether they be Biblical Theologians or Historians of Doctrine.

> If the knowledge of religion is conceived as something to be reached historically only, then we should have to regard the theologians who have brought it to this point as clerks in a mercantile house, who have only kept an account of the wealth of strangers, who only act for others without receiving any property for themselves. They do indeed receive salary, but their reward is only to serve, and to register that which is the property of others. Theology of this kind no longer has a place at all in the domain of thought. . . . History occupies itself with truths which were truths—for others. . . . With the true content, with the knowledge of God, such theologians have no concern.[12]

So much for Biblical Theology! Here Hegel, the supposed apostle of "objectifying thought," attacks it, and urges the need for uniting subject and object. Kierkegaard himself might have said this, and perhaps he did, for there is a passage in his Journals about the Professor who receives the reward of the labour of others which could well be an adaptation of Hegel's remarks.[13]

Hegel would have thought little of our modern fashion of word studies and would probably have regarded them as a dishonest way of seeking to conceal Systematic Theology behind exegesis and so exempting it from criticism. "Mere word-interpretation can only amount to this, that for one word another co-extensive in meaning is substituted; but in the course of explanation further categories of thought are combined with it. For a development is advance to farther thoughts. In appearance the sense is adhered to, but in reality further thoughts are developed. Commentaries on the Bible do not so much make us acquainted with the content of the scriptures as rather with the manner in which things were conceived in the age in which they were written."[14]

This passage shows that if Hegel and Schleiermacher were united in their desire to make theology contemporary and even existential, they were opposed in their method. Schleiermacher solved the problem by expelling Biblical from Systematic Theology, Hegel by absorbing Biblical into Systematic Theology. Hegel was insistent that Biblical Theology should not be

11. G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (E.T., London, 1895), vol. 1, p. 33.
12. Op. cit., vol. 1, p. 41.
13. R. Brettall (ed.), *A Kierkegaard Anthology* (London, 1947), p. 432.
14. Hegel, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 28.

allowed any kind of independent freedom. Even exegesis is not allowed to open its mouth without acknowledging itself as philosophical theology. "As soon as theology ceases to be a rehearsal of what is in the Bible, and goes beyond the words of the Bible, and concerns itself with the character of the feelings within the heart, it employs forms of thought and passes into thought."[15]

Hegel certainly gave a straight answer to Kant's question about the object of metaphysics and the object of theology. In both cases the answer was Absolute Spirit, which is at one and the same time the Spirit of God and the spirit in man—existing eternally in itself, eternally proceeding from itself, and eternally the same. He could claim to have overcome the problems of objectivism and subjectivism but only at the risk of identifying God and man. He could claim to have bridged the gulf between past and present but only at the cost of absorbing the past into a perfect present. Absolute Idealism (it has been said) demanded an absolute philosopher who could unite in his own person the authority of the Bible with that of the Church. It may seem credible to Roman Catholics that the Pope is infallible; it seemed less credible to Protestants that Hegel was infallible.

Enough has perhaps been said to illustrate the contention that the problem of Biblical Theology and its separation from Systematic Theology did not arise simply as a result of Biblical Criticism, but was made inevitable by Kant's attack on traditional metaphysics as it had been known in the Protestant world in the 17th and 18th centuries, that Kant's attack was one which Protestants could not ignore, and that the replies to Kant's challenge which I have described were all in some way inadequate. In conclusion I wish to indicate that Karl Barth's theology can also be construed as an answer to Kant's challenge, worthy of comparison with those of Schleiermacher and Hegel but escaping their errors. Far from being philosophically unsophisticated or naïvely supernatural, Barth seems to have taken the greatest pains to understand and to struggle with the philosophical problems which have been raised in the path of Systematic Theology.

For Barth, there is no return behind Biblical Criticism or behind Kant to the old "Divinity." It was rationalistic, even if it was rationalistic in a supernaturalistic way.[16] The doctrine of verbal inspiration, he says, may have been worked out as a bulwark against rationalism, but it was itself a product of rationalism, an attempt to provide a proof of revelation from reason, to make it an object of secular experience, and to replace faith and indirect knowledge with direct knowledge, presumably of a quasi-scientific kind. We cannot make the Word of God the direct object of our rational study any more than God Himself. The Word of God would remain like the *Ding-an-sich* behind the words of the scriptures but for God's act. God gives Himself to us in the Holy Scriptures, but He does so by an act of his grace and con-

15. Op. cit., vol. 2, p. 343.
16. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (E.T., Edinburgh, 1934, etc.), vol. 4, part 1, p. 368.

descension and is not our possession. The Bible is not a semi-magical device through which God is induced to speak. Barth here joins Kant in his attack on rationalist orthodoxy, but his attack is based not on scientific but on theological grounds.

What he says about the Bible is strictly paralleled by what he says about the words and concepts which we use in Systematic Theology when we "attempt in faith to respond to God's revelation." Systematic Theology is not a semi-magical device to compel God to speak through the Bible, or in any other way.

> To the question how we come to know God by means of our thinking and language, we must give the answer that of ourselves we do not come to know Him, that, on the contrary, this happens only as the grace of the revelation of God comes to us and therefore to the means of our thinking and language, adopting us and them, pardoning, saving, protecting and making good. We are permitted to make use, and a successful use at that, of the means given to us. We do not create this success. Nor do our means create it. But the grace of God's revelation creates it. To know this is the awe in which our knowledge of God comes true. . . . Our supposed idea of God . . . will always be the idea of the world and in the last resort of man. It will always be our own reflection, the hypostatization of our thought and speech. . . . We cannot ever mean God of ourselves. But He not only means us but knows about us. . . . He causes the miracle to happen by which we come to participate in the veracity of His revelation, and by which our words become true descriptions of Himself.[17]

J. V. L. Casserly suggests that Kant's first Critique can be considered as a critique of language. As such a critique, Barth has both understood it and answered it.

"God is known only by God." This is Barth's reply both to Kant and to those who interpret Kant in a positivist way. The Word of God never becomes the object of our scientific study of the scriptures but comes to us only in God's act of revelation. Nor is God Himself the object of our theological concepts so far as they are our concepts. "He has to make Himself object to us in the grace of His revelation." But he does, and this is why Barth is able to say with traditional orthodoxy, and against Schleiermacher that the object of theology really is God, but God in his revelation. God may be for Barth a hidden God, as fully hidden from human sight as the *Ding-an-sich*, but when he reveals himself "there is no hidden God, no Deus Absconditus, at the back of His revelation." How do we know that this is indeed God? Because when we meet Him, we have no power over Him "except the power to be His child, trusting and obedient to Him."[18]

Barth's answer to Kant is that God is not the object of our scientific knowledge, but that he does truly give himself to us in revelation. In the event of revelation we know the noumenon. In Natural Theology, as in subjective Idealism, the mind knows only itself. His answer to Schleiermacher is that because of God's revelation Theology can be Theology and not

17. Op. cit., vol. 2, part 1, pp. 179, 223, 228, 229.
18. Op. cit., vol. 2, part 1, pp. 178, 231, 210.

Anthropology. What is his answer to Hegel? First, that there is no pure conceptual language for theology, no way of leaving behind the inadequate picture language of the Bible and raising it to philosophical exactitude. Even the most rigourously conceptual language is human and awaits the spirit of adoption to cry out Abba, Father. "Dogmatics cannot speak down from heaven in the language of God, but only on earth." Secondly, theology itself does not formally embody Christian truth or give it any final expression. "The Word of God is above dogma as the heavens are above the earth," says Barth, referring to the Roman Catholic conception of dogma, but his words would apply as well to the Hegelian conception of theology. Theology cannot hope to set up a series of permanent doctrinal propositions. If the Bible is a witness to the revelation, dogmatics is a witness to this witness. "We relate ourselves to the event of faith, by relating ourselves to this sign. The thing we indicate is thus itself an index or a pointer."[19]

How, finally, does Barth handle the problem of the relation of Biblical to Systematic Theology? By declaring in the strongest way the necessity and the freedom of Dogmatics. It is not enough "to rediscover the world of the Biblical view and concept or to adopt the Biblical language in order to make the viewing and conceiving and language of truth our own."[20] Systematic Theology "must not be expected and ought not to try to achieve what is really the business of Biblical Theology,"[21] but he does not in saying this suggest that it has some superior task to perform. On the contrary, it is precisely because the church is human and theology is human that it must avoid the temptation to think that it can ever achieve a final and satisfactory form in which the truth of the Biblical revelation will be fully expressed. Dogmatics must be Biblical in the sense that it listens again and again to the Word of God, but it must also be confessional in that it must listen to the Word not only as it is attested in scripture but as it is conditioned for us by the teaching which has moulded and established the listening church of today.

In Barth's view, then, Systematic Theology cannot be content to be an historical science in the sense in which Collingwood intended that Metaphysics should be. It cannot be simply the exposition of Biblical material or material from the history of doctrine as mere information to be carried home. It may be this too, as all teachers demonstrate in their lectures, and as Barth demonstrates in the learned passages of exegesis and historical theology which occur in small type in his *Dogmatics*. But beyond the exposition of this material it is "the movement of this material—this material set in motion." And how do we know that this can be done? Not by proving it, but "factually"—by doing it.[22] Of Barth himself we must say that he has done it, with such skill and at such unwearying length as to excite our amazement, our admiration and our critical attention.

19. Op. cit., vol. 1, part 1, pp. 306, 309, 301. Cf. vol. 1, part 2, pp. 764–769.
20. Op. cit., vol. 2, part 1, p. 195.
21. Op. cit., vol. 1, part 2, p. 821.
22. Op. cit., vol. 1, part 1, pp. 304, 324.