The New Method of Studying the Bible.

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IV.

1. We may now endeavour to discover the significance for Christian theology of this religious-historical method, which is by many scholars held to be the exclusively legitimate method, necessarily supplanting the dogmatic, apologetic, or religious-philosophical. The problem is dealt with by Reischle in his *Theologie und Religionsgeschichte*, a volume which consists of five lectures, and falls into three parts, in the first of which he defines the meaning of the demand for the religious-historical method, explains how it has arisen, and shows the problem for theology which it involves. In the second part he describes the relation of this method in its practical and theoretical aspect to historical theology. In the third part he considers how systematic theology in its two branches, apologetics and dogmatics, with ethics, is affected by it. At each stage of the discussion he sums up in a thesis, a procedure which is a very great help to the reader in following closely the course of his argument.

2. In the first division, then, (*a*) the meaning of the demand for the religious-historical method is shown; (*b*) the origin of the demand is traced; and (*c*) the problem for theology it offers is indicated. The first part dealt with in Thesis I. has already been adequately treated in the preceding discussion. The second is stated in Thesis II. The results of the application of scientific methods in varied departments of human study have produced a changed mental attitude, a confidence that scientific methods are the only valid ones. Dissatisfaction with Christianity as it now is has also led many to attempt to discover what Christianity once was, if perchance in it they may find the rest of soul they seek. Although a disciple of Ritschl's, Reischle expressly mentions as one of the reasons for this demand a reaction among the younger disciples from some of his one-sided views. Ritschl raised, but did not solve, the historical problems of the Person of Christ and the Kingdom of God. By violent exegesis he forced his system on the New Testament teaching. He ignored the history of religions, tried to impose what he regarded as a normal type of piety in opposition to mysticism, and expressed himself too arbitrarily in regard to the relation of Christian faith to science and philosophy. The older disciples have not yielded to the reaction to the same extent as the younger, because, while recognizing these defects, they feel, as the younger do not, how great a debt is due to him for liberating Christian theology from the bondage of the old standpoint. The third point is stated in Thesis III.; the demand raises a double problem for Christian theology—a practical, how far it must meet the demand by modifying its methods of work; and a theoretical, how far it has any right to continue to exist at all, assuming as it does the claims of faith and the practical needs of the Church. This double problem applies as much to exegetical-historical as to systematic theology.

2. The second division of the volume is concerned with the relation of the religious-historical method to exegetical-historical theology. The two questions which here arise are, must it change its method, or even must it cease to exist as a distinct study? (*a*) The first of these questions is answered in Thesis IV. In seeking to gain the knowledge of the full historical reality of the Biblical religions, and sympathetically to enter into the religious experience there recorded, the religious-historical method deserves all encouragement. But it has certain evils which must be avoided. It runs the common risk of valuing too highly its own achievements, and depreciating all former efforts, for novelty has a dangerous charm, and may allure the scholar from the highway of truth to the bypaths of error. Its perils are to trace a development where there may have been none, but where ancient belief or custom may have been preserved; to assume that similarities of doctrine or practice must involve historical connexion; to discover without justification the survival of crude primitive elements in the higher phases of religion; to lay undue stress on the forms of religion, which are often quite inadequate as an expression of its essential content. Loans

from one religion by another are more probable in the world-view, and in the outer form of the religious life of the community; but less probable in the personal religious life of the great religious personalities especially, as there is in them an original creative force, which no external historical factors explain, but which is their own secret, discoverable only by personal sympathy. Thus the value-judgment of religion cannot be excluded even from exegetical-historical theology by the religious-historical method.

(*b*) The second of the questions, whether this religious-historical method leaves any separate province for historical theology, is answered in Thesis V. While the theologian will use the methods of criticism, analogy, and correlativity as vigorously as does the historian, his different personal attitude towards the matter which he is dealing with produces differences in his results. As a believer he will not suspect every writing which contains records of miracles if on other grounds it seems trustworthy. Of the theologian as of the historian we can only demand that he brings to his task no unproved assumptions, but a mind open to receive the impressions which the historical reality may make upon him. As the theologian desires to discover the meaning and the worth of his subject for Christian and Church life, he confines himself to the Old and New Testaments, and the history of the Church and dogma. In historical description judgment must be exercised; causes must be traced, purposes indicated as well as facts determined. In this interpretation the Christian theologian cannot but be guided by Christian standards of value, by not only his belief in the reality of religion, but also his conviction of the universal validity of Christianity. The religious genius or originality, which for science is a mystery, is for faith a revelation of God.

3. The third division of the volume deals with the relation of the religious-historical method to systematic theology generally, and to its two branches—apologetics, and dogmatics and ethics. (*a*) Whether the method makes systematic theology altogether unnecessary or not is the question dealt with in Thesis VI. Although the students of religious history mock the systematic theologians, claiming that historical inquiries are alone scientific while systematic efforts are only personal testimony without any claim at all to be called science, yet they themselves cannot altogether escape the systematic task, even the epistemological investigation of what historical research is, aims at, and is bounded by. In dealing with religious history especially, they must concern themselves with the questions of religious philosophy: what is the essence of religion as seen in its psychic functions? what are the laws of its development in history? on what grounds may religion be regarded as normal and necessary to man? and why may reality be assigned to the objects of faith? Such an inquiry passes over into the particular question of the truth of one religion, especially of the Christian. This is the task of *Apologetics*, which must lead on to *Dogmatics and Ethics*, as the validity of the Christian religion can be proved only by exhibiting the eternal truths it offers to faith, and the eternal norms it offers to life.

(*b*) The bearing of this demand for a religious-historical method on the task of Apologetics in special relation to the criticism of Troeltsch is stated in Thesis VII. While Troeltsch claims that Christianity is to be treated by the same method as all other religions, he admits—(i.) a spiritual core in all religions, which shows itself in great religious personalities, and which points to a contact with the Divine Spirit; (ii.) a progress in religions, of which Christianity shows itself the highest, although it cannot be described as the *absolute*; (iii.) a need of a religious metaphysical inquiry to connect the Christian idea of God with the view of the world as a whole, reached when the results of the sciences are combined in a unity. Reischle's criticism of Troeltsch touches two points: first, his judgment on the place of Christianity among the religions is not a purely scientific conclusion, but a personal estimate; second, he too easily abandons the proof of the absoluteness of Christianity, the motive of enthusiasm for missions. Troeltsch admits the first charge in describing his judgment of Christianity as 'a moral-religious conviction,' but seeks to justify it as won by 'a careful survey, an impartial sympathy, and a conscientious estimate' of the other religions. The second charge he seeks to meet by insisting that the idea of absoluteness belongs to Hegelian idealism, and that history cannot present to us anything absolute, although he admits that the Christian may have a certainty that 'he has met God, and has heard His voice,' and that 'he is in the right way, follows the right star.' Reischle insists that to refuse to deal

with this question of absoluteness is a mutilation of the apologetic inquiry, as the Christian must believe that in the historical, human person of Christ he has the eternal divine life itself; that Troeltsch exaggerates the importance of comparative religion which, though it must not be neglected, cannot prove to demonstration the superiority of Christianity, but can only prepare for the highest proof; that we must seek in Christianity itself the grounds of our conviction of its worth and truth, for on the one hand we must prove its value to the individual and society, and on the other hand we must show that the divine revelation in Christ is real, and that it meets the need felt in all other religions; that, lastly, on this proof of its reality and sufficiency must rest the claim of absoluteness.

(*c*) How dogmatics and ethics as branches of systematic theology are affected by the demand is shown in Thesis VIII. While agreeing with Troeltsch that dogmatics must rest on an apologetics which justifies Christianity in a comparison with other religions, and cannot ignore a strictly historical investigation of the life and the teaching of Jesus, of the Scriptures and dogma, Reischle maintains that it is not concerned with a merely historical account, but aims at defining the eternal realities that arise for our Christian faith in a knowledge which, though relative, is progressive. Although the task of dogmatics is unchanged, the method may need modification, probably as regards *its attitude to the Scriptures*. The theologian may be required to study the Scriptures more critically than he has hitherto often done in order to find what they do really teach. But when he has done this, his proper work begins—to determine what constitutes the essential and permanently valuable Christian confession of faith. As Troeltsch's demand that Christian ethics should include an effort to come to an understanding with the great world-views may be met in Apologetics, the task of Christian ethics remains the same, to determine the form of individual and social life, which is created by the Spirit of Jesus Christ. If the task and the method remain unaltered, does the content suffer any change? While our conception of the history of the world is in many respects widened, yet so long as Christian dogmatics remains Christian, it cannot abandon the fundamental principles of Christian faith, and must guard against an evolutionary monism, a point of view that historical studies may suggest. It must assert a supernatural personal God, not in the sense of the old supernaturalism, as an external causality in the world, but as realizing in the world a purpose different in character from all natural aims. It must refuse to regard Jesus as only a religious hero or genius, as merely a prophet or a founder of a religion, but must confess Him as the Saviour and the Lord, who gives to mankind really what other religions have vainly sought. It must distinguish the Spirit of Jesus Christ from the religious spirit of humanity as the Spirit which brings us into fellowship with God Himself, so that we participate in His holiness.

That the historical method has its limitations; that it cannot solve all its own problems, but is forced beyond its own boundaries to answer some of the questions which it is forced to face; that there are necessities of human life, the demands of faith and the aspirations of duty, which it cannot meet; that Christian faith and duty depend on the inner witness of personal conviction as well as on the outer evidence of historical facts; that, therefore, the religious-historical method does supplement the theological by gathering, ordering, sifting its material, but cannot possibly supplant it,—these in brief are the important conclusions which Reischle reaches in his discussion of the Relation of Theology and Religious History.

(*To be concluded.*)