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CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY AND THE BIBLE

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There are many and varied philosophies to be found in our world today. Many of these have a direct bearing on theology and the Bible. The contemporary philosophies that delve into the field of theology generally seek naturalistic causes or reasons for the Bible. Very few accept the Bible in its original revelation as verbally and plenarily inspired of God, and for this reason these philosophies are constantly changing as man's ideas change. Thus, in order to keep abreast of the times, one must acquaint himself with both historical as well as contemporary theological variations.

In this study we will note a few of the more prominent contemporary theological philosophies and compare them with the Bible. It will be our purpose to give a brief outline of each and then to conclude with a critique.

LIBERALISM

Liberalism was a development of German theology which arose as a protest against the orthodox views of the Bible. It appeared in America late in the nineteenth century, and became virtually synonymous with the "social gospel." It had a four-fold basis: (1) Philosophically, it was grounded in some form of German philosophical idealism. (2) It placed unreserved trust in the new critical studies of the Bible, which contained a denial of the historical doctrines of revelation and inspiration. (3) It believed that the developing science of the times antiquated much of the Scriptures. (4) It was rooted in the new learning, and in this sense it is modernistic (preference for the new over the traditional) and liberal (the right of free criticism of all theological claims).

It altered Christianity to suit its philosophy and reinterpreted all the major doctrines. The traditional doctrine of the trinity was rejected and replaced by some sort of a functional trinity; the transcendence and wrath of God were replaced by over-emphasized doctrines of divine immanence and love; the Kingdom of God was regarded as no longer founded upon the death and resurrection of Christ, but upon the spiritual and ethical quality of the life of Jesus; salvation was no longer seen as freedom from wrath and sin, but from sensuousness or a materialistic or selfish ethic; the division of the saved-or-lost was denied, and all men were held to possess the same religious potentiality, all men formed the so-called "brotherhood of man," whose corollary was the "Fatherhood of God"; the purpose of the church was to bring all men under the Christian ethic in every aspect of their lives, and it preached this so-called "social gospel."

The shallow and unrealistic attempts of this philosophy to explain and understand Christian realities, coupled with the wars of the twentieth century and the depression, caused men to turn aside from liberalism, and in its place came existentialism.

EXISTENTIALISM

Existentialism began with Kierkegaard, a Danish theologian (1813-55). This term is vague and almost indefinable, for it has many and complex diversities, due in part to the philosophical

interpretations of its varied adherents. The broadest definition is that it is a realist reaction against the shallow optimism and easy rationalism of the nineteenth century liberals. However, it is naively realist and therefore historicist, and in that it adheres to historical methodology, one might say it is still fundamentally liberal. It follows the tradition that says existence is prior to essence, and indeed all reality is in historical experience, and that essences are only abstract names. There is no real existence beyond history, either in an ideal or mystic sense above history, or in an eschatological sense at the end of history.

Note how existential theology affects the doctrines of (1) Christology, (2) the Resurrection, (3) the Church, and (4) the Word:

(1) The historical Jesus is the Christ, but not in the traditional sense as the personal Lord whose body was raised from the tomb. Rather, Jesus is the occasion for the encounter between the cross and the sinner who makes the decision for the ultimate. Apart from this encounter there is no more significance to Jesus than any other martyr in history. It is not the Jesus of history that concerns the existentialist theologian, but the revelation we meet in the moment of decision.

(2) The resurrection is redefined to mean not a future life in an incorruptible body in a new heaven or eternal age, but a regenerate life here and now freed from the frustration of death. Although death is inevitable, we do not fear it because we accept it. In other words redemption is not a future victory, but a present adjustment.

(3) The concept of the church is radically changed because of their inwardness of subjectivity. God is always subject; always "Thou", never "It". This divine "Thou" can never be moved, that is, He can only be spoken to in answer to His call, which comes inwardly. God always treats me as subject too, and never as an object. Thus the relationship between God and man cannot be apprehended by a set of propositions nor an emotional experience to be realized by a genuine feeling. The relationship is rather one of speaking and responding to God's Word, hence it is one of decision. But no man can make this decision for another. For most existentialists the church as a visible structure only gets in the way of the decisive conversation between the "I" and the "Thou." There seems to be no place for the church, as the body of Christ.

(4) The same observation can be made in relation to the Living Word and the Scriptures. The existentialist finds the written Word to be a troublesome obstacle in the way of a decisive decision. As a result the Living Word is separated from the Written Word, and we are left without a rule or norm of authority.

Thus the existentialists separate what they call Christ from Jesus, as well as from the church, from the Scriptures, and from the sacraments.

Existentialism appears in various forms as propounded by its individual adherents. Though there are many men associated with this philosophy, and each has added his own paradoxical twist to that which was originally laid down by Kierkegaard, two main forms of existential thought are currently flowing in the theological stream. The first is Neo-orthodoxy, which had its beginnings with Karl Barth when he wrote an exposition of Romans in 1919. The other is Bultmannism, which received its name from Rudolph Bultmann, professor at the University of Marburg, in Germany. Of the two theories of existentialism, Barth's is the more conservative. The basic line of cleavage

between the two stems from their divergent views on the Bible. Though existentialism would in general put the Bible on the periphery of the circle of revelation, and man's experience in himself in relation to the Christ as the core, Barth would adhere to a more Biblical understanding than would Bultmann. The attitude of Bultmann is that the gospel story, in its Biblical setting, is incredible to modern man, for the gospels are mythological in character. He desires to demythologize the New Testament.

The prevailing opinion today is that the philosophy of Bultmann will take over theological thought in the coming years, and the Neo-orthodoxy of Barth will decline. It has been said that Germany today is as nearly Bultmannian as it was Barthian a generation ago, and liberal a half-century ago. Let us examine briefly the existentialism of both Barth and Bultmann.

The Theology of Karl Barth

The theology of Barth has been characterized as the theology of crisis (the crisis experience of a person in his own encounter with the Christ), or as dialectical theology (the arriving at the truth by setting opposites over against each other), or as Neo-orthodoxy (the accepting of the central doctrinal formularies of theology since the Protestant Reformation, with a contemporary formulation and re-interpretation). These phrases are sometimes used interchangeably.

Neo-orthodoxy aligns itself with the liberal school of Biblical criticism, and one of the chief differences between it and orthodoxy relates to the Bible. Barth believes that revelation is primarily in Jesus Christ. The Bible, so to speak, is on the periphery of the circle of revelation, and Jesus Christ is the center of that circle. The Word is Jesus Christ and the Bible is a witness to the Word. It is therefore a word about the Word. Some parts of the Bible are better words about the Word than other parts, but all of it is merely a witness to the Word, Christ.

Can we say, then, that the Bible is the Word of God? Yes and no (dialectical theology), in the sense that it is a word about the Word, and that the Bible becomes the Word of God. Neo-orthodoxy says that the text of the Bible is a human product full of errors, but that when God uses it to overpower us, it becomes His Word.

Barth says that since the gospel is a witness to the Word, it is a mistake on the part of the orthodox to identify the words of Scripture with the Word of God. It is human to err, and since the Bible is a human book with errors, it bears the Word of God to us in a broken and imperfect form. For this reason Neo-orthodoxy accepts some of the higher critical views of Scripture commonly rejected by orthodoxy.

One would think that since the Bible is relegated to the periphery of revelation and Jesus Christ to the center, that the life of Jesus would have an important place in Neo-orthodoxy. But such is not the case. For the significance of Jesus Christ cannot be in His life, since the records of that life are not trustworthy; rather, it lies in His cross. The cross is the revelation of God that all things in this world are vain and doomed to extinction. The cross is also the sign of the election of all in Christ to life. The cross is thus a symbol of both despair and hope (dialectical theology).

The Barthian believes that sin is the mistake of making ourselves the center of things instead of God. Salvation has to be the work of God in man, for sin can never be overcome by human

goodness (which is Biblically true). This comes about in the following way: first, man despairs; then out of this comes contrition; out of this faith is conceived; and finally in faith is newness of life and power. Salvation is the shattering or breaking of self, and this may come in a single crisis experience or in repeated ones. It is significant that Barth's emphasis is on the cross of Christ, and never on the blood of Christ.

Neo-orthodoxy is an attempt to re-interpret traditional or orthodox Christianity in such a way as to make it more acceptable to the so-called intellectual advance of the day. The critical or liberal approach to the Gospel is modified and synthesized in this system, by an attempt to preach the orthodox truths while building on the liberal approach to the facts. This is an impossible thing to do.

The Theology of Rudolph Bultmann

Bultmann has retreated from the neo-orthodox type of existentialism as propounded by Barth, to an existentialism of his own, in which he attempts to de-mythologize the New Testament. His view is that the gospel accounts are largely mythological in content. Bultmann suggests a de-mythologizing of the New Testament by means of which the mythological elements must be cut away, such as the myth of apocalyptic cataclysm, the myth of the pre-existent Lord, the futuristic myth of Heaven, and the historical myths of angels, demons, miracles, the virgin birth, empty tomb, and resurrection. What he has left is the cross, and the gospel of justification by grace through faith.

Bultmann contends that the true objective of the gospel message never was to describe supernatural events taking place in space and time, but, rather, that under a mythological garb the story was intended to announce God's coming to man's soul, or self, and to bring about a radical change in a person's existence. When the individual comes to grips with the gospel story he becomes aware of the misery of his "existence", viz., that his self is enslaved by the powers of this world, such as worry, sin, and death, and that he is unable to live a life truly his own. Though the gospel story is a myth, through the individual coming to grips with the truthfulness of its meaning, the self is delivered from that tyranny and enabled to live a new life of true spontaneity. That change of "existence" is considered as an act of divine grace, and according to Bultmann it is identical with what the New Testament calls redemption. Yet that result is accomplished by means of hearing of the gospel story rather than by any activity of the man Jesus.

This in effect amounts to the elimination of the miraculous or supernatural constituents of the scriptural record, since Bultmann adheres to a view of the world as a firmly closed system, governed by fixed natural law, in which there can be no intervention from outside.

The rejection by Bultmann of the basic concepts of the Bible mutilates the Christianity of the New Testament in so radical a manner, that the cross and the gospel of justification by grace through faith no longer have any authoritative meaning in the Bible. The stature of Jesus is reduced to that of a mere man. According to Bultmann, the linking of our redemption with God's choice of an ordinary mortal individual (Jesus), no different from any other man, and of an event (the crucifixion), in no way miraculous or supernatural, is the real offence of Christianity.

ORTHODOXY

Orthodoxy is that branch of theology which came to prominence in the church during and after the second century. The preservation of Christianity was seen to require the maintenance of orthodoxy against Gnosticism and other trinitarian aberrations. Seventeenth century Protestant theologians stressed the importance of orthodoxy in relation to the soteriology of the reformation creeds.

The word "orthodoxy" itself, though not Biblical, expresses the idea that certain statements accurately embody the revealed truth-content of Christianity, and are therefore in their own nature normative for the universal church. The idea is rooted in the New Testament insistence that the gospel has a specific factual and theological content (I Corinthians 15:1-11; Galatians 1:6-9; I Timothy 6:3; II Timothy 4:3, 4), and that no fellowship exists between those who accept the apostolic standard of Christological teaching and those who deny it (I John 4:1-3; II John 7-11).

Contemporary orthodox views, as opposed to those who hold to liberal or existential views, are seen to be held by two groups in this country known, in a loose sense, as the "Fundamentalists" and the "Evangelicals." These two groups adhere to a set of doctrinal beliefs which are orthodox, and they differ only as to the methods of applying their beliefs to contemporary culture. Adherents of these groups are not of any particular denominational structure, but cut across denominational lines, though there are included within both of these elements various denominations.

The basis of this contemporary orthodoxy is embodied in the beliefs of the following "cardinal" doctrines: (1) the inspiration and inerrancy of scripture, (2) the Trinity, (3) the deity and virgin birth of Christ, (4) the creation and fall of man, (5) the substitutionary atonement of Christ, (6) the bodily resurrection and ascension of Christ, (7) the regeneration of believers, (8) the personal return of Christ, and (9) the final judgment of all men to eternal blessedness or eternal damnation.

Fundamentalists generally hold to a position of separateness from all groups who would hold to any other views than those stated above, while Evangelicals, though believing the same, would take a position of individual preference as to whether or not one should separate from or remain in affiliation with groups who would not hold these views. Both Fundamentalists and Evangelicals maintain a strong testimony to their Christian faith and insistence upon orthodox views.

A CRITIQUE OF LIBERALISM AND EXISTENTIALISM

Liberalism, as such, is dead today because it had within it the seeds of its own decay. When the quest of the liberal Jesus failed, the liberals did not abandon their historical methodology, and historicism still dominates the remaining vestiges. The optimism of liberalism collapsed, for it was exposed by two world wars and the great depression. But out of its collapse there arose a new spirit of our age, that theory known as "existentialism". In that existentialism adheres to an historical methodology one could say that in some respects it is still in the liberal stream of thinking. However, it is a chastened form of liberalism. The neo-orthodox (Barthian) stream takes a more conservative view than the liberal on the Bible and salvation, while Bultmannism exhibits a radical form of existentialism in its de-mythologizing of the gospel story. Both aspects of existentialism do violence to the Bible as the inspired Word of God. Both utilize terminology akin to orthodoxy, but redefine the terms to suit their purposes. Both question the authority of Scripture, and thereby undermine their own systems of theology, for all that we know about sin, salvation, and eternal

life, is found in the Bible. Barth criticizes Bultmann for his radical attempts to demythologize the New Testament, and says that in so doing he projects a real mythology of his own. Yet Barth himself does violence to the Bible in stating that it is only a word about the Word.

No true Christian today would minimize the importance of the application of Christ's work. But in existentialism there is a subjectivization which subverts and destroys the gospel. If we dismiss the objectivity of Christ's finished work, it avails us little to make it the sign or theme of preaching or understanding. No myth can be the Good News. The Christ of the Bible is the Logos, not the mythos. Christ needs no demythologizing at the hands of human scholars.

The mythology of existentialism is the substitution of man-centeredness for Biblical Christ- or God-centeredness. The existentialist has much to say about God and salvation, but the fact remains that in his philosophy man is still the center of things. Man declares the nature of the Bible, he demythologizes, he decides the theme, he is the substance and center of the salvation event. Jesus Christ belongs to the periphery.

In contrast, the true Gospel is God-centered. God controls it. God is the subject; and the story, the work, the power, and the glory are His. To put man in the center does not just pervert the Gospel, it displaces it, and makes it impossible. Existentialism, as well as liberalism, leaves man with nothing--without God, Christ, a Gospel, or faith; with neither true death to sin nor true resurrection to life.

God's Word, the Bible, is His Word for us today. The philosophies of men constantly change and shift; God's Word to men remains constant, and is "the same yesterday, today, and forever"; and the true message of salvation is still found in the written words of Jesus Christ, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life, no man cometh unto the Father but by me" (John 14:6).

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