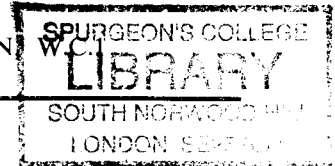


THE THEOLOGICAL STUDENTS' FELLOWSHIP

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THE APPROACH TO THEOLOGICAL STUDY

EVERY THEOLOGICAL STUDENT looks for more from his course than the acquisition of factual knowledge, important though that may be. He hopes, among other things, that he may acquire an insight into the real nature of theological discussion. He looks for an ability to understand at depth the problems which theologians attempt to solve, and to see the fundamental philosophical presuppositions which lie behind and determine a man's conclusions on a particular issue. He hopes to be able to see the particular problems within the larger context of theological study, to assess their significance and the way in which a particular conclusion bears upon the solution of other problems and hence is related to the whole theological enterprise. He may then be more able to evaluate the contributions of individual theologians to particular discussions and to theology as a whole.

But if the theological student is to reach the point where he can begin to be a theologian, he must find his own standpoint from which to view the work of others and to formulate his own conclusions. Such a position may be only tentative, and indeed may consist in his commitment to the application of a certain critical method, but it is important that the philosophical and religious presuppositions and implications of such a position are clearly understood.

The motives which determine what position is adopted cannot be merely academic. If the student is to have responsibility in preaching or teaching, he will want to be very sure of the truth of what he is to impart, especially if he believes that the eternal welfare of his hearers depends upon their obedience to it. Moreover, by definition the standard of reference for theology is God Himself, in His self-disclosure in Christ. Nothing therefore should satisfy the theologian which is less than truth from God, bearing His character and authority and standing the scrutiny of His holiness.

Theological study ought to be undertaken only out of obedience to Jesus Christ, for unless we believe that the human mind can arrive unaided at a sound knowledge of God and His truth, only so may we hope for divine help and for any measure of success. The theological student dares to embark on his study only because he believes that Jesus Christ, to whom he is submitted as his Lord, has called him to it. It follows that Jesus Christ must be authoritative for that study; to lose sight of that fact is to make nonsense of study undertaken at His bidding, and to engage in something other than Christian theology.

The evidence of the Gospels, at very least the primary source for our knowledge of Jesus Christ and His will, emphasizes our dependence for a knowledge of God upon revelation. The consummation and centre of revelation is Christ Himself, but He did not teach that there is no revelation apart from Himself; He is rather the focus of revelation. Jesus endorsed the claim of the Old Testament writers that God was speaking through them; these are they which testify of Him. And in His promise of the Spirit to His apostles to communicate information concerning Him lies the basis of the apostolic claim to write a message received from God and of authority equal to that of the Old Testament Scriptures. It follows that to accept the authority of Jesus Christ in theology demands that we take from Him the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as divinely inspired revelation. They are the source from which we derive the material for our work, and the

canon or rule by which we must constantly test it; they are also the standard by which the unchanging God will judge it. This is not the place for a detailed exposition of the doctrine of Scripture and its grounds; for that the reader may be referred to a number of works.¹

The personal acceptance of the authority of Jesus Christ, and of the Scriptures on the authority of Christ, leads the Evangelical to certain definite conclusions about the content of the Christian message thus revealed. As God's revelation of Himself, it is God-centred. The task of the preacher has been described as one of bringing God into His own world; if that is a presumptuous description, it at least emphasizes that the preacher's task is to proclaim God and His ways to a world which is idolatrous, in which the worship and service due to God have been given out elsewhere. Apart from revelation, we are constantly inclined to conceive of a god made in the image of man, and the preacher is under solemn obligation to proclaim God as He reveals Himself in the Scriptures, giving full weight to all His attributes. Perhaps today we need to learn afresh that God is Almighty and Sovereign, and to see His righteousness and the holiness by which He is separate from creatures and from sinners and His every dealing with man as Judge and Saviour is clearly characterized. Moreover, we have to affirm constantly that this *is* God's world, and that He is its Creator, Lord and Judge. This relation of the Creator to His world is fundamental to biblical religion. He deals with the world according to moral principles; to say this is not to impose upon God limitations from without, but to say that He deals with men in a way consistent with His own character.

In these circumstances the clear affirmation of Scripture is that man stands under the condemnation of God for his sin. Man's failure to acknowledge God and his own accountability to God is the most serious evidence of human sin and of divine judgment. It indicates the nature of sin and the inability of man, in view of his status as creature and his character as sinner, to do anything to right the situation.

The redemption which God has accomplished in this situation is the great theme of the Bible. Christianity is good news for sinners, for those who realize their plight before God and their need of the gospel. If we present it as anything else, we present our solution to the problem as we conceive it to be, rather than God's solution to the problem as it is. The gospel is that God in love and mercy has acted and acts to save sinners. Christ has fulfilled the righteousness required by the law as the out-writing of the character of God. And in Christ God has made an atonement for sin which is duly in accord with His own character, in that in His free and unconditioned mercy He has Himself borne the judgment due to human sin, so that He is Just and the Justifier of him who believes in Jesus. This atonement is applied to the human heart by the Holy Spirit, who implants in the soul a new principle of life, and leads man to turn from his sin in repentance and to trust in Christ and His death for salvation. By the continued work of divine grace, the helpless sinner who has already been justified and given a new inner principle of life is now led to an increasing knowledge and love of God and obedience to His will, and his character becomes increasingly fitting to his justified status and to an eternity to be spent in the presence of God.

If theology concerns the knowledge of such a God and His ways with men, true theology can never be a ground for intellectual or spiritual pride and self-satisfaction. Indeed, theological study is far from a merely intellectual business. A true knowledge of God must be learnt in the heart as well as in the mind. To endeavour to scrutinize the truth of God at arm's length, even in the interests of 'objectivity', is nothing short of blasphemy. Because the theological student is handling revelation which concerns redemption, he can understand it only by the help of the Holy Spirit, with a regenerated mind, and a deep consciousness that he is himself one of the redeemed.

This has consequences for the personal priorities of the student; for if he is truly to learn the knowledge of God his chief and daily study (whatever his theological 'speciality') will be of Scripture, and his prior activity be prayer. Then all that he does will be governed by his personal vision of Christ in the mirror of His Word, and on his knees and with his Bible he will be learning to know God for himself — a knowledge which will be a power in his own life and which he may declare on the authority of God to the people. What blasphemy to pretend to represent God otherwise, if we

have neglected God Himself! A consideration such as this is humbling to all of us, and a call to be sure at the start of this academic year that our study is altogether submitted to God, to His Word and to His ways.

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¹ The following provide helpful conservative statements:

General: *Revelation and the Bible*. Edited C. F. H. Henry (Tyndale Press).
'*Fundamentalism*' and the Word of God. J. I. Packer (I.V.F.).
The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible. B. B. Warfield (Marshall, Morgan and Scott).

On our Lord's view of Scripture, in addition to sections in the above:

The Old Testament in the New Testament. R. V. G. Tasker (S.C.M.).

Our Lord's View of the Old Testament. J. W. Wenham (Tyndale Press).

Ch. 7 of *The Witness of Matthew and Mark to Christ*. N. B. Stonehouse (Tyndale Press).