

FAITH AND THOUGHT

*A Journal devoted to the study of the inter-relation of the
Christian Revelation and modern research.*

1971

Vol. 99

Number 3

LEWIS DRUMMOND

Presuppositions in Christendom: Free Churches.

In this paper Dr. Lewis A. Drummond, tutor at Spurgeon's College, London, speaks for the free churches. He confesses to some difficulty, for despite different traditions of worship, Christians do not differ greatly in their basic beliefs! Differences are rather ones of emphasis than belief and, regarding the matter in this light, the Author discusses free church attitudes to private judgment, the authority of the Bible and the mode of salvation.

In approaching the theme of the presuppositions of the free churches I define the term *presuppositions* broadly and take it to mean the essential principles of the free churches in contrast — if only by way of emphasis — to those of Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Anglicanism. For if we define the word presuppositions in a strict sense, all Christian communions must stand on the same ground — for example, all allow for knowledge by revelation, and agree that the concept of God is a justifiable 'leap of faith'.

So in this paper I shall attempt to present the ideas that set the free churches in contrast to the rest of the Christian world. But this is where the trouble begins. The extreme diversity of free church thought reminds us of the pebbles on a beach rather than of a monolithic structure. If one picks up a pebble and says, "This is what the free church is like", a thousand others cry dissent. Nevertheless, it is not impossible to discern those elements of agreement which, in the past, have moulded free church thought. To these we turn.

About a century ago Dale¹ noted three distinguishing characteristics of free churchmanship.

1 The right of private judgment in matters of faith and religion.

- 2 The sole authority of the Scriptures as a rule in religious faith and practice.
- 3 The free gift of salvation.

Realising that the same principles are to be found – implicitly or explicitly – in the confessions of Anglicanism, Catholicism and Orthodoxy, and conscious of the aforementioned diversity in our own free church ranks, I shall be brave and plunge in, beginning with the concept of

The Right of Private Judgment

Insistence on this right is a foundation stone of the free churches. From the days of Robert Brown (commonly regarded, though not without controversy, as the ‘founder of congregationalism’) until the present time, exercise of the right of private judgment has been responsible for the varied patterns that the free churches tend to exhibit.

But an explanation of the term is called for. What does the free church mean by the right of private judgment? It certainly does not mean, as a wit once defined it in caricature, “Whatever you believe, if you believe anything, you should at all events believe nothing that was ever believed by anybody else”.²

Ewing has more correctly stated the principle in these words:

If I am a man, I am indeed related to other men, and am influenced by them in a thousand ways . . . But, in the last analysis, I stand alone before the God who made me, who commands me and who will judge me. To be a man, is to think, to decide, to act! Indeed, the glory of the soul is that it should be free, living, and spiritual, acting with intelligence intending what it does. This is the principle of liberty and of progress.³

This statement implies several basic presuppositions. First, it assumes that the self *qua* man is a substantial self. Secondly, it holds that a self is genuinely morally free and morally responsible. Thirdly, it implies a God who can be known, i.e. a God who reveals His mind and purposes to man. Fourthly, it assumes that this God is worthy of one’s interest

and love. Finally, it projects the idea that no man is "an island entire of itself", every man being dynamically related to his fellows. A word may now be said about each of these assumptions in turn.

The concept of a substantival self is something of a battle-field today, both in psychology and philosophy. Most of those who take issue with the idea will grant that some interpretation must be given to the 'I' of subjective experience, yet they usually contend that the interpretation is to be found in experience itself. In other words, they view the self as the sum of its experiences. Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* is a classic presentation of this line of argument. A more convincing view, however, is that of C. A. Campbell who argues strongly for a substantival self. Take, for example, his argument from cognition.

He points out, correctly I think, that a thinking subject is always to some degree aware of itself. Self-consciousness is a presupposed fact in all cognition. A cognizing subject is *always* conscious of itself, however inexplicitly. Furthermore, this thinking subject is somehow the *same* subject throughout its varying cognitive experiences. We know that cognition is never of the nature of an "atomic simple". Any object that is not seen as related to other objects has no significance for the judging mind. That is, what is cognized is never bare "A", but always "A" in some sort of relationship to "B" (C, D, etc.). However, unless the subject to which "B" (C, D, etc.) is present, is the *same* subject as that to which "A" is present, no relationship could be apprehended between "B" (C, D, etc.) and "A". So in cognition, at least, the subject must always be identical to itself in all its varying cognitive judgments. Moreover, the cognizing subject must be *conscious* of that identity, for if such is not the case, the apprehension of "A" as related to "B" (C, D, etc.) would still fall into separate worlds of experience. Therefore, the subject self must be something "over and above" its particular experiences, i.e. something that *has*, rather than *is*, its experiences since its experiences are all different while it remains consciously the same. In a word, the self must be a substance.⁴

Of course, there are other arguments to be made for the concept of a substantival self. Yet, this one argument should

at least demonstrate that the free churchman with his presupposition of a substantial self is on arguable grounds and thus cannot be *a priori* ruled out of court.

Secondly, the free churchman assumes that this substantial self is genuinely free in moral, conative activity. He makes true ethical decisions for which he is responsible. One or two arguments must suffice to defend this principle. First, there is the point that if the self is not genuinely free in conative moral action, i.e. has genuine open possibilities in ethical choices, the whole framework of moral praise and blame falls to the ground. If all actions are determined acts, moral praise and blame is clearly untenable.

There is also the argument that comes from common sense. Now it must be granted that it is not wise to argue on the ground of unsophisticated "common sense" or appeal to the "man in the street" on every issue. Yet in some areas, the man knows what he is talking about. And the concept of free moral action seems to be one of those areas. How then does the average man react on this issue? Of course, he obviously takes a behaviourist attitude towards the animal kingdom. He does not *morally* blame the dog which bites him. But not so concerning human action. Although we make allowance for bad environment and/or heredity, we do morally praise and blame our fellow for their actions. We judge that in every moral action there is that element for which the author is the sole author, and therefore responsible. Life is lived out in such a context and it is difficult to extricate oneself from this basic life assumption. Moreover, if this idea of judgment by man is valid surely God must judge. Thus we conclude that God has ordered this universe on a moral basis that is ingredient in the fabric of existence.

Furthermore it is difficult to assign a clear meaning to moral judgment and responsibility unless there is a God who reveals Himself, His will, and His purpose. At least this is true in an ultimate sense. I do not wish to discuss here the rational validity of holding the concept of God. Suffice it to say that my personal conviction is that the argument from religious experience has the greatest hope of demonstrating with some force the validity of God's being, even if it is only a starting point. This is why I find considerable help in Rudolf Otto's

approach in *Das Heilige*. The God with whom I have had to do does come to me in the context of the *Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans*.

But the issue is, does this God permit me to discover and know His will? If not, judgment – private or otherwise – is all but an exercise in futility, ultimately. Now if we follow men like Otto and Campbell who contend that the *Numen* transcends the rational world and is ‘super-rational’, then it follows that God’s will cannot be discovered by human rational processes alone. Rationalism cannot encompass or fathom supra-rationalism. Such a concept of God demands revelation, i.e. God must take the initiative and come to me and reveal His will to me. And does not authentic religious experience itself always bring us into something of a consciousness of the immeasurable and humanly unbridgable gulf between the creature and the infinite Creator? God *must*, therefore, be the one who bridges the gap. So if we are to answer our query, Can I know God’s purpose?, it must be that God will reveal it. Yet, this is exactly what He has done, the free churchman tenaciously affirms. He has presented Himself in the person of His Son; Jesus Christ. As Otto has said, “If there is a God and if He chose to reveal Himself, He could do it no otherwise than thus.”⁵ In similar fashion, Professor Lewis has stated, “I do not see how the ‘Christ of faith’ can be known except in properly knowing the ‘Jesus of history’.”⁶ Thus we hold that in Jesus one can come to know God, meaningfully relate to Him, discover His will and thus make personal judgments concerning His purpose.

This now leads to the fourth assumption mentioned, viz. God is worthy of one’s interest and love. Again the argument from religious experience demonstrates the ‘worth’ of God. First, all genuine worship is directed to a Being who possesses an element of *mystery*. In a word, the worshipful has a supernatural quality. Further, the worshipful Being must have transcendent *value*. Worship implies adoration. And such an emotion can be evoked only by that which is felt to possess transcendent value. Moreover, worship points to a being of transcendent *power*, for all worship is permeated with a sense of awe. And the objective correlate of awe is power, i.e. power that is mysterious and overwhelming. Thus we are back

to Otto's *Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans*. And if Otto is correct, it surely seems very clear that the object of our praise and blessing is nothing short of infinite interest to us.

Finally, and fifthly we stated that free church thought presupposes that all believers, though free to judge for themselves, are bound up in fellowship with one another. This is what saves the principle of private judgment from the attitude of "as soon as anybody else believes the same thing as yourself, take care to believe something different."⁷ We must not confuse the whimsical right of thinking as we please with the right of private thought. In all realms of thought; scientific, historical, etc. there must be restraints on the liberty of speculation. And the religious realm is no exception. Thus the free churchman feels the guiding harness of the Scriptures, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, his God given logical thought process and the constraint of the fellowship of the Body, the Church. Concerning the latter, it must be recognized that a Christian is never an "atomic simple". Left alone, one may develop private judgments that are mere fancy. But the consensus of the Body can often be that guide which leads the Christian into truth. Of course, this guidance is not seen by the free churchman in any arbitrary, authoritarian sense. Actually, the individual even brings his private judgment to bear on the pronouncements of the whole body. Yet, if wise, he listens carefully and puts his judgments up to the test of the consensus of the Church — or of Christian friends for that matter.

Moreover, most free churchmen hold to the Scriptural concept that the individual believer is guided in his judgments and lead into the truth by the indwelling Holy Spirit. Jesus said, "The Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things" (John 14:25). The free churchman takes this very seriously. He holds that *all* genuine believers, not just a privileged few, possess the guiding Holy Spirit. But here also, the believer must judge whether or not his inner experience that prompts him to some judgment is genuinely of the Holy Spirit.

Thus the Christian is cast into the context of a group of spiritual "checks and balances" as he makes his private judgments. He is free — absolutely free — to decide his actions and

develop his system of thought in the light of his understanding. But he brings all of these things up against reasonable thought, the revelation of God in Christ, the Scriptures, the opinions of the Church and the inner witness of the Spirit of God. In this setting the free churchman believes a man comes to discover and know God's will and purpose.

The Authority of the Holy Scriptures

The free church has at times been accused of substituting for an infallible Church an infallible book, thus violating the right of private judgment. And it may be true that restricted elements in the free church communion are guilty of bibliolatry. As a generalisation, however, the charge seems unfounded. Luther's approach to the authority of the Scriptures is surely free from this criticism and his view has been foundational in free church theology. For Luther, the authority of the Bible did not rest upon the mere fact that the Scriptures seemed to the reformer to certify the truth of what he took as the basis of faith. Rather, it was a living intuition of salvation that crystallised his view of the Bible.⁸ As Dorner points out,

The apostolic and prophetic writings only came to be regarded by Luther as the decisive rule and judge, *after* the saving matter. . . . (It) approved itself to his heart by its own inherent power. Before the decisive turning point of his life, the Scriptures only influenced him as a *means* of grace similar to preaching. . . . It is clear that for Luther the great original certainty which attests all other truth, as it is not the authority of the Church, so also it is not the authority of the canon of the Holy Scriptures handed down by the Church. It is rather the *subject-matter of the Word of God*, which however different may be its forms of expression, is able to attest itself to the hearts of men as the Word of God by itself and its divine power.⁹

Now this does not imply that Luther was a slave to subjectivism. Rather, it simply affirms that for Luther the Bible possessed a vital and dynamic authority. As Melancthon's formula states, justification by faith is the material cause of Protestantism and the *formal* cause is to be found in the supreme, dynamic authority of the Bible. For Lutherans, therefore, the biblical principle came to be adapted reflexively.

In other words, what first struck Luther was his insight into the great truth of religion: "the just shall live by faith". Then the means whereby this truth struck him became clear, *viz.* the Scriptures. Thus he was compelled to assign the Bible a place of fundamental significance.

Of course, two possible extremes can develop out of this position. First, an under emphasis on the idea of the Word of God as a living, experimental reality can lead to the rejection of any objective criterion. This extreme subjectivism is seen in elements of the Anabaptists, the Quakers, the disciples of Schwenckfeld, etc. On the other hand, probably as a reaction to the former error, the free church 'fundamentalists' restricted *all* communication from God to men to the letter of the Bible. Of course, both perversions miss the balance Luther attempted to maintain. But neither of these extremes is the general characteristic of the Free Church at its best.

This concept of the Word of God finds its fullest modern development in the thought of Karl Barth. To Barth, the Word of God is not important simply because it can authoritatively project a doctrine. For Barth, the Word of God is discourse. And discourse must always be from person to person, the Word of God being essentially revelational. Barth holds that St. John's Gospel rules out any narrow conception of the Word. Does not John say that "the Word was God"? Thus the Word is a person, a divine Person at that. Now the implications of this are clear. The Word is not primarily, let alone exclusively, words or thoughts which are communicated to us. It is a living Act, an Event, in which God as a Person comes to us. Therefore it is creative and all-powerful. And this revelation of God cannot be divorced from the living Person of Jesus Christ. So wherever the Word of God is authoritatively present, Christ must necessarily be there in person.

Thus it is easy to see why Barth considers the Word of God as always 'contemporaneous', a term he borrows from Kierkegaard. The Word of God can never be thought of or treated as belonging to the past; it is not simply historical. The true Word of God is of such a nature that it takes hold of us; something happens; it raises us into God's presence.

Now here is the crunch for the free churchman who views the Scriptures as the supreme authority; What is the relation-

ship between the Word of God in this Barthian sense and the Bible? In answer, it must first be clear that because the letter of the Scripture is historical the Word of God and the Bible cannot be thoughtlessly identified. God is not bound and hemmed in by a book. But at the same time, as Barth says, *we* are bound to the written word, for it is through the Bible and its proclamation that God has chosen to come to us and make Himself known to us. And it is only as we are willing to acknowledge this fact and submit ourselves in obedience to it that we can be touched by the word of God itself. This does not make the book a thing of magic that automatically reveals God. On the contrary, it is only as the Word of God in the power of the Spirit takes hold of us that the Bible as a whole will be illuminated by the active and living presence of the Word. And unless this happens, the Bible will always be for us a dead letter no matter how much learning we bring to it. Thus a narrow biblicism is out. Nevertheless, because the Word of God comes to us in the Bible, it can correctly, in this modified sense, be called the Word of God.

Perhaps the best free church attitude is expressed by Dale when he writes;

I think that the universal experience of devout Christians will sustain me, when I say that in reading the New Testament the idea of the authority of the book, as a book, is hardly ever thought of. The book – explain it how we may – vanishes. The truth I read there, shines in its own light. I forget Matthew and Mark, and Luke, and John. I see Christ face to face; I hear His voice; I am filled with wonder and joy.¹⁰

In this I essentially agree. I agree, that is provided one acknowledges that the Bible must always remain as the objective, inspired criterion that, as God's authoritative truth, guides me in matters of faith and leads me to the living Word; Jesus Christ.

The Free Gift of Salvation

The concept of salvation as a free gift of God is not peculiar to free church dogma, yet because it is the core of the free church position, it must at least be outlined.

Two expressions centre around this theme, *viz. salvation by grace* and *justification by faith*. It must be pointed out, however, that these two terms are not intended to indicate two distinct principles. They are more correctly seen as two aspects of the same principle; the objective aspect being the gift of God and the subjective the appropriation of the gift by men. And as it is the objective aspect that determines the subjective; we shall start with, *salvation by grace*.

Several things should be said about this phrase. Firstly, it stands for what free churchman see as really *new* in the New Testament. In a word, it is the essence of Christianity. Of course, salvation is not unique to New Testament thought. Nor is striving after it. But as Luther said,

If you desire to fulfil the law and overcome concupiscence, believe in Jesus Christ, in whom you are offered grace, justice, peace and liberty . . . These promises make up the New Testament.¹¹

Luther obviously saw God as demanding an obedience to law that was humanly unobtainable. He explicitly states, "the law . . . is so high and of such range that no human power is capable of keeping it."¹² Here is the dilemma of religion. No system of law, morality, or works of religious charity can lift man above himself. Man appears helpless. But it is right here that God acted, and acted in a unique way. For God does not display himself as the ancient founder of a religious system or a philosophical goal of human idealism and religious striving. He uniquely and once for all showed Himself as the living and free initiator and giver of life. As Nichols puts it;

Those who have struggled for saintliness . . . know that not only have they fallen short, but that human nature is incapable of saintliness by its own moral resources or by devotion to the sacraments. Men are healed, not by their own struggles for integrity or by mystical raptures, but by trustful acceptance of what is done for them by God.¹³

St. Paul expresses it aptly when he says, "The *free gift* of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23). Thus the free churchman holds that in a unique way "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19).

In the matchless life, vicarious death and glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ, God's grace and provision for man's inadequacy and sin was perfectly set forth. And through this Gift, He has displayed his sovereignty in redeeming men.

Now the question arises, How is this gift of God received? It is on this side of the coin that free church thought tends to contrast with other communions. To generalise a bit, free church theology rejected any idea of sacerdotalism or sacramentarianism. It sees the free gift of salvation personally appropriated *solely by faith*.

Of course, this lands us squarely in the most famous of Luther's paradoxes. From God's side, as it were, justification is by His grace alone. From man's perspective justification comes by faith. St. Paul even put it in the daring form that God justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5). But paradoxes did not bother Luther. Witness to this is his labelling Aristotle as 'that monster' and Reason as 'Frau Hulda', 'the Devil's bride. Even though he may have said these things with tongue in cheek, a purely rational theology was not Luther's first love. But the question is, *What is faith?* Is it something man *does* or is this too a gift of God's grace? If we choose the former, the paradox has real sting.

It is here that free church thought has tended to be divided. Over-simplifying, we might say that this is where the conflict between Calvinism and Arminianism lies. But it is clear that Calvin found some difficulty with this paradox and took the line that faith also was the gift of God. He took this to its logical end declaring that salvation was *all* of grace. Therefore faith, because it figures in salvation, must be a gift of grace also. Arminius was not quite of that ilk. For him exercising faith was something men could and must do. But this is old ground and need not be traversed again here. One thing is certain, the gift of salvation is mediated by faith alone. And whether we view man as a recipient of even his measure of faith or whether it is something he does for himself, the free churchman holds that God's gift comes no other way. Dale again speaks for all free churchmen when he writes,

The only 'right state of mind' in which to go to God is to go to Him, confessing that there are innumerable reasons why He should

reject you — that your sins have been atoned for by His own infinite love.¹⁴

This attitude may not resolve our paradox or answer all questions, but it does bring God's free gift of salvation to the human experience, and that is what this free churchman sees as the essence of the Christian faith.

REFERENCES

1. R. W. Dale, *Protestantism: Its Ultimate Principle*, 1874.
2. *op. cit.*, p. 22.
3. John W. Ewing, *Talks on Free Church Principles*, 1905, p. 45.
4. C. A. Campbell, *On Selfhood and Godhead*, 1957.
5. Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, Penguin edition, p. 187.
6. H. D. Lewis, *Our Experience of God*, 1959, p. 276.
7. R. W. Dale, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
8. Louis Bowyer, *The Spirit and Form of Protestantism*, 1963, p. 45.
9. R. W. Dale, *op. cit.*, p. 60 - 61 from Dorner's *History of Protestant Theology*, Vol. I, pp. 221 & 231.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 50 - 51.
11. Louis Bowyer, *op. cit.*, p. 35 - 36, from Luther's *Treatise on Christian Liberty*.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
13. James Nichols, *The Meaning of Protestantism*, p. 114.
14. R. W. Dale, *op. cit.*, p. 84 - 85.