

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE FORK IN THE ROAD

The proverbial “The chickens have come home to roost,.” old saying is well established in the English language. It refers to birds returning to their nests at nightfall – thus the notion of bad decisions or actions coming back to haunt those who made them. For over three decades, much of contemporary Evangelicalism has been following cultural trends in a consuming desire to be relevant. Driven by pragmatism, much of Evangelicalism was marching to the drum of societies whims and fads. The results were predictable, Evangelicals caught up in this process still retained their Evangelical credentials, but the theological language had been noticeably affected by our therapeutic culture. In our therapeutic culture the individual becomes the focus of our daily concerns. We become preoccupied with wholeness rather than holiness. Happiness replaces righteousness, and feeling good about ourselves is the gauge by which we measure ourselves. Perhaps in no more important area is this manifested than when speaking about sin. Traditionally sin has always been understood theologically. Not anymore. Instead of seeing sin as it pertains to God the Lawgiver, in typical therapeutic form we increasingly psychologize sin as something that makes us feel bad about ourselves. It should not go unnoticed, Wells argues, to see how the various doctrines of Scripture are interrelated. If one is altered or changed, it will have a tell-tale effect on other doctrines. If sin is redefined, the doctrine of God will likewise be modified because the biblical concept of holiness cannot be maintained if sin is something other than sin. David Wells draws a fascinating analogy between the spirituality of our evangelical forebears like Martin Luther, John Owen, and David Brainerd, and the kind of spirituality that pervades contemporary evangelicalism. The world they inhabited becomes enigmatic to those who live and breathe in a therapeutic culture. Their doctrinal understanding of the biblical themes of sin and the holiness of God, for example, strike many present-day evangelicals’ ears like a foreign language does the ears of a tourist traveling in another country. Communication becomes the major obstacle to getting around. Not only is the doctrine of God turned topsy-turvy, but the doctrine of Christ is seriously altered. This should not come as a big surprise. After all, if sin is not something subject to the judgment of a holy God, then the cross-work of Christ becomes something other than a propitiatory sacrifice. Wells, along with the Protestant Reformers, rightly contends that the Christian faith will always be misunderstood if the cross is misunderstood. It is not uncommon today to hear evangelicals speak of the cross of Christ in a very nebulous fashion. Somehow, someway, Jesus did something at Calvary that means we don’t have to worry about our sins. The whole panorama of redemption is reduced to trying to get people to ask Jesus into their hearts so that they can experience the abundant life. Saving faith in this scheme is seen primarily as something that brings inward joy, happiness and a problem-free life. People are told to receive Christ in order to have all their personal concerns remedied. Allan Bloom complained that his generation of educated M.D.s and Ph.D.s lacked any comparable learning. When confronting the serious issues of life, they responded with clichés, superficialities and the material of satire. Sadly the same thing can be said of much that passes for evangelicalism. Our theologically emptied-out faith is exposed once we start trying to speak about eternal realities. Like those taken into the Babylonian captivity, we forget our covenantal language and can only

babble the verbiage of our captors.¹ Well, there is another old saying – be careful what you ask for – you just might get it! Evangelicals morphed into things like *Emergents*, *Open-view theists* and *Post-Conservatives*. Along the way they began jettisoning Reformational distinctives – and guess what? They found themselves completely comfortable rubbing elbows with the world around them – so much so that it was difficult to tell who was who. This has been noticed by more than one observer. Diana Butler Bass (who graduated from Saguaro High School in Scottsdale), has recently published a barn burner book entitled *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a Spiritual Awakening* (Harper, 2012). Bass was once herself a very committed Evangelical (she attended Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary) but she has long since shed that label. This is how Peter Jones describes her book, “For Bass ‘religionless Christianity’ is the elimination of creeds and dogmas, of authority structures and inhibiting moral codes, of a propositional, inerrant Bible. She hails a movement borne along on the breath of an undefined ‘Spirit’ into an age of pure inner experience. This Awakening has nothing to do with historic Christianity. Bass notes that ‘Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists have been undergoing similar revitalizations’ and concludes that ‘the next great awakening will have to be an interfaith awakening’ because ‘the 1970’s were...the first stirrings of a new spiritual awakening, consisting of the encounter of Western and Eastern religions and ...[the incorporation] of each other’s practices into their respective faiths.” Such an “interfaith” One-ist view of the Spirit involves a radical redefinition of God that Ditches “submitting to a transcendent—and often distant-God: in favor of “finding one’s self in God and find[ing] God in one’s self.” This involves praying to God as “our Mother” and seeing the godhead “in less dualistic [Two-ist] terms...less in terms of an absolutist, sin-hating, death-dealing ‘almighty Father in Heaven’ and more in terms of...the nourishing spirit of mother earth.” I am sorry. These statements are pure pagan One-ism. The union of Nature with the divine jettisons the transcendent God of the Bible and removes any need for a divine Savior, so Bass’s “Christology” becomes pagan Gnosticism. In the biblical Gospels, Jesus’ question, “Whom do you say that I am?” gives rise to the heavenly revelation of his divine nature. For Bass, the question “plunges Jesus’ friends into...the self-query, ‘And who am I?’” This question, *not* in the biblical text, is precisely where the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*, goes. “Jesus” tells Thomas not to call him Lord because he and Thomas are of equal status. Knowledge of the self as divine is true salvation. Bass shows this by citing the Gnostic *Book of Thomas the Contender*: “...he who has known himself has already understood the depth of all things.” Such a Christology empties the Gospel of all biblical content. As Bass puts it, “Salvation is not...escaping some dreadful fate of judgment...at the hands of a wrathful God; rather, it is being saved *to* ourselves.” She leaves no place for the cross or the atonement. The “Spirit” now at work since the Sixties is “a romantic spirit...[with] an ethic of self-realization.” Such moralism is salvation by works for the creation of “a global common good.” This “Awakening is actually something we can do”—delivering people from the “fear of women, Islam, pluralism, environmentalism, and homosexuality.” Bass’s new faith is paraphrased by the title of a recent Unitarian sermon, “Hindu and Unitarian Universalist Encounter and Transformation on the Way toward a New Universalism;” her kind of thinking allows Oprah Winfrey to call herself a Christian while assiduously following the Hindu mysticism of Deepak Chopra and Eckhart Tolle; her vision is the very content of the present day revival of religious paganism, animated since the turn of the 20th century by the occult vision of Madame Blavatsky who saw in the joining of the East and the West the final achievement of spiritual One-ism. So in this time of emerging “new universalism,” when it is becoming illegal to teach from certain Bible texts, how many “believers” will find their way into the suffocating arms of religionless Gospel-less Christianity? How many of our theologically-starved rising generation of young Christians, under the enormous influence of Emergent leaders who love Bass, will be lost to the only Faith that can save them?² Bass still claims to be a Christian – but not in the Biblical sense since, according to her, any notion of propositional truth (i.e. dogmas, theological doctrine) are no longer binding. What about the Bible? Does it matter? These questions touch the very important question concerning the nature and authority of the Bible. Many people pay their respects to the Bible; they are even willing to acknowledge that the Bible contains some useful information. But does it provide us with a decisive criterion by which we are to live ... and die? Our conception of Scripture is therefore extremely important, because, as John Murray correctly observed, “as will be our conception of Scripture, so will be our conception of the Christian faith. What, then, is to be our conception of Scripture?”³ The text before us today defines, in a

way unsurpassed by any other text in the Bible, how Scripture as to its ORIGIN, CHARACTER, AUTHORITY, and PURPOSE is to be understood. What we find in this text is Scripture's assessment, or verdict, as to Its own distinctive character.

I. THE CONTEXT

This is Paul's *last* epistle (II Timothy 4:6). We usually attach particular interest to the last words of men, and so here also we should note the importance of what Paul has to say as he approaches the end of his life.

A. The Times.

The Apostle was writing in "the last days" of world history (II Timothy 3:1, I Timothy 4:1). This is a reference not to some distant future end times. The "last days" began with Christ's first advent (Hebrews 1:2; Acts 2:17).

B. The Exhortation.

Paul is calling Timothy to remember this in order that he might conduct himself with all sobriety, knowing that perilous times lay ahead (II Timothy 3:1-4). Because of this, the apostle urges his young disciple to remain steadfast in the doctrine Paul had taught him (II Timothy 3:14).

II. THE IMPORT

How is this relevant? The "last days" have not run their course. *We* are in these *last days*, and it is in this context that Paul delivers his great statement on Scripture. We do well to take note, for we are subject to the same wavering of faith that faced Timothy.

A. The Instrumentality.

Every word of the Bible came through the agency of man...be it Moses or David or Paul. Human authorship is not suppressed or overlooked. But this does *not* mean that the Scriptures, having passed through the hands of sinful men, have the infirmity that we always attach to the efforts of man.

B. The Author.

The Apostle declares, "All Scripture is given by inspiration by God." What does this mean? The word translated "inspiration of God" (KJV) is THEOPNEUSTOS and occurs only here in the New Testament (and is not found earlier in all Greek literature), but its meaning is not in doubt. The lexical *consensus* is clear. The word means "God-breathed" (as in NIV) "and, in accordance with the genius of the compressed, clear Greek compounds, this includes in itself the implication that the words are *spoken* by the *Spirit of God*."⁴

C. The Extent.

"All Scriptures God-breathed." Some have argued that *all* here cannot really mean all in the absolute sense because the Bible contains much that is not God's word, e.g., the words of the serpent in Genesis 3:1-5. But Paul's point is this: it is by God's actions that what the serpent said is written. Thus we have the revelatory word of God in recording not only the agency, but also the strategy, of the evil one, so that the Scriptures, in the fullest and strictest sense of the word, are the revelation of God—"How much Satan deplores this inscripturated revelation! It is Satan's art to conceal his own strategy. It is God's grace to expose it."⁵ Scripture, it must be declared, is a fixed body of writings. As such, this means no more or no less, that it is a fixed body of words, sentences, clauses, paragraphs, chapters and books. God is not continuing to give inscripturated revelation. The Bible, and the Bible only is the written Word of God.

III. THE UTILITY OF SCRIPTURE

Notice how this is put: it is *profitable* (KJV), *useful* (NIV) – from the word, ὀPHELIMOS to help (cf. I Timothy 4:8). Four spheres are mentioned in which the usefulness of Scripture can be seen. Two deal with doctrine and two with practice.

A. Doctrine and Reproof.

One is distinctively *positive*; the other represents the *negative*. Doctrine is concerned with what is true.⁶ The Scriptures are concerned with absolute truth, and doctrine has to do with the whole

wide range of thought respecting God, the world, man, life, death—there is no area that this does not touch. If we have no interest in doctrine, we have no interest in God.

B. Correction and Training.

This is the ethical plane. Again the negative and the positive aspects are underscored.

IV. **THE PURPOSE**

“There is a distinct objective in this profitableness of Scripture. The verse opens with a clause introduced by HINA which denotes that purpose or result.”⁷ What is this purpose? So that “the man of God” may be equipped. Who is this person? It is the person who has been laid hold upon by God, separated unto and possessed by the true and living God. Note in particular the word *thoroughly*. It is a term that expresses comprehensiveness. There is *NO* situation, *NO* demand, *NO* circumstance that confronts us in which the Scriptures are not adequate and sufficient.

CONCLUSION: B. B. Warfield long ago saw the same kind of thing in his day – a kind of subjectivism that betrays the very Christianity it attempted to retain by its neglect or even renunciation of its distinctive objective character. Nowadays men cheerfully abandon the whole substance of Christianity, but they will hardly be persuaded to surrender the name. They really wish to have a creedless Christianity. “Creeds,” they shout, “are divisive things; away with them!” If there must be such things, at least let us prune all their distinctive features away and give ourselves a genial and unpolemic Christianity, one in which all the stress is laid on life, not dogma. Where does this leave us? An *undogmatic* Christianity is no Christianity at all. We are often told that “Christianity is a person, not a doctrine.” How true! Christianity is a person; but on pain of reducing it to magic, which would no longer possess any ethical and, consequently, any religious quality, we must grant that Christianity, precisely because it is essentially a person, is also a body of facts and ideas. When the apostle Paul declared, “I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, *and Him crucified*” (I Cor. 2:2; italics added), he was defining a special doctrine of Jesus as the essence of Christianity.⁸ Along similar lines, the late Gordon Clark once remarked, “Christianity minus intelligible doctrine is simply unintelligible doctrine minus Christianity.”⁹ And so we have come to the proverbial fork in the road – we have two choices: Embrace the kind of Christianity described by Diana Butler Bass or the Historic Christian Faith set forth in the Confession of the Protestant Reformation. What will today’s Evangelicals do? What will we do?

ENDNOTES

¹ See my analysis in the article “A Prophet For Our Times: The Jeremiad of David F. Wells” in *Reformation & Revival: A Quarterly Journal For Church Leadership* (vol. 7, No. 3, Summer 198) pp. 207-13.

² Peter Jones, *No “Next Big Thing?”—Bad Conclusion!* How many “believers” will find their way into the suffocating arms of religionless Gospel-less Christianity? <http://theaquilareport.com/97118/> Bass’s book carries glowing endorsements from two of the big name Emergents, Rob Bell and Brian McLaren.

³ *The Collected Writings of John Murray III* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), p. 256. The original Westminster Faculty (especially John Murray) publications on this subject have shaped this sermon and my own understanding of Scripture.

⁴ B. B. Warfield, *Revelation and Inspiration in Works I* (Baker, 1981), p. 263.

⁵ Murray, op. cit., p. 259.

⁶ David F. Wells has documented the tragic loss of truth in the Church’s attitude toward doctrine in his book *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Eerdmans, 1993). Lee Strobel, one time associate pastor at Willow-Creek wrote a book titled *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary: How to Reach Friends and Family Who Avoid God and the Church* (Zondervan, 1993). One of the disturbing aspects about this book was the statement that unchurched people’s “question is not so much, ‘Is Christianity true?’ but, ‘Does Christianity work?’”—This was stated in such a way as to imply that pragmatism is the solution in our evangelism.

⁷ In the New Testament Greek grammar this is called a “hina-purpose-clause” cf. Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles: The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Eerdmans, 1972), p. 165.

⁸ *The Selected Shorter Writings of B. B. Warfield II* (P & R, 1973) p. 250-225.

⁹ G. Clark, *In Defense of Theology* (Mott Media, 1984) p. 119.