

Ferre', Barth, and Neo-orthodoxy.

In the early years of this century the peace of Christianity was troubled by an unbelieving movement commonly called Modernism. Modernism denied the infallibility of the Scriptures, hesitated on the Deity of Christ, attacked the Virgin Birth, doubted the miracles, denied the vicarious Atonement, and transmuted the Resurrection into some spiritual exuberance of Apostolic experience. In opposition to Modernism there arose many Fundamentalist groups who made these facts and doctrines the chief items of their creed. The Fundamentalists do not seem to have made out too well. The quality of their leadership deteriorated; their influence diminished; and they failed to recall the large denominations to the faith. However, there was no other movement that had any greater success.

In the meantime Modernism encountered difficulties of its own. Although these people rejected many important parts of Biblical teaching, they still believed that Jesus was an historical character and that he was a great religious leader. The theology of the Gospels they might repudiate as subsequent accretions, the miracles may have been later legends, but the ethical standards of the Sermon on the Mount should excite the admiration of all ages. Now, this generated a problem for the Modernists. The Gospels as we have them are a mixture of miracles and theology along with the ethical teachings. This picture of Christ found there cannot be historical. Therefore, to discover who Jesus really was, it is necessary to peer beneath and behind the Gospels. Investigation is required to uncover the historical Jesus.

The search for the historical Jesus was undertaken by many authors, who eventually arrived at many conclusions. One conclusion, more prominent at the beginning than at the end of this development, pictured Jesus as a simple minded man, totally uninterested in theology, who taught a very pure but not very philosophical morality. Other writers concede that Jesus made some theological remarks but differ as to their significance. Such theological remarks might indicate that Jesus shared some of the superstitions of the Jews of his day, or they can be interpreted as a polite accommodation to the current forms of speech without implying that Jesus believed them. The theological material that caused the modernists the most trouble has to do with the idea of a Messiah and his eschatological role in history. The Modernists produced a wide range of views as to Jesus' Messianic consciousness. Some said he made no such claim. Others said it was merely a form of speech. Finally Albert Schweitzer concluded that Jesus made and really believed this claim, so that he must be regarded as a half-cracked fanatic, who, nonetheless, has some religious value for us today.

Since World War I in Europe and since World War II in the United States Modernism has given way to a new religious movement called Neo-orthodoxy. There are several reasons for this change, but one of them has to do with the great variety of conclusions obtained in the search for the historical Jesus.

According to the Neo-orthodox a religion that must almost daily adjust itself to the shifting results of historical criticism is not a firm enough faith to support modern men engulfed as they are in world wide calamities. Any religion that depends on history is a relativism. What is true today becomes false tomorrow. Even a belief in God cannot survive in this state of mind. Now, the Neo-orthodox profess a firm belief in a transcendent God. Therefore they must find a revelation that is not subject to historical investigation. A religion completely divorced from all historical connections can indeed be found. It would take the form of a set of abstract truths or universal principles, similar to a system of Geometry or to Hegelian Idealism. Such a philosophical system could contain the laws of science and the laws of morality too. But it would contain no dates, no places, no historical events. Such a religion, however, would not be the Christian religion. Yet the Neo-orthodox want to be Christian. This confronts them with a difficult problem. The problem they face is this: How can a revelation, centering in Jesus Christ so as to be a Christian revelation, come from God to man and be applicable to us in our daily lives, without being vitiated by the relativism of historical flux? That is to say, if Jesus Christ actually lived at a certain date in history, and if Christianity is essentially dependent on Jesus Christ, Neo-orthodoxy in its attempt to escape history faces a great problem in trying to show that it is really Christian.

Different Neo-orthodox theologians have attempted to solve this problem in somewhat different ways. Some have been broadly philosophical; others have paid more attention to the details of doctrine. For this morning's address I shall speak on one of each. For my first example I shall choose Nels F. S. Ferre, Professor of Theology at Andover-Newton Theological School.

First, I should like to indicate Dr. Ferre's position on some particular doctrines, and then, second, I wish to indicate how he believes revelation can come from God to man.

Among fundamentalists Dr. Ferre may be known best for his denial of the Virgin Birth and his supposition that the father of Jesus was a German soldier in the Roman army. This is shocking enough, but there is much more. Another instance of Dr. Ferre's rejection of the main doctrines of Christianity has to do with the Atonement. In the same book (page 31ff.) he explains that Jesus is not our High Priest as the epistle to the Hebrews says. "The love of God needs no placating, no offering once and for all to satisfy him." This much is clear, avers the author, from the parable of the prodigal son. "By doctrines insisting on a blood-thirsty God, that is, that he required Jesus' death before he could allow himself to love us, so that he even sent his Son basically to die -- Christian theology effectually denied that God ... is naturally and eternally love."

No comment need be made on the word "bloodthirsty", but it should be noted how Dr. Ferre distorts historic Christianity to make a point. He represents the Atonement as a doctrine that prevents God from loving us before Jesus died. Such a distortion is a little surprising. Is it not a matter of common knowledge among learned theologians that the Atonement represents God as so loving His elect that He sent His Son to die for them? If God originally had not loved anyone, how could the sending of His Son be explained?

Not only does Dr. Ferre use uncomplimentary language, but he also misquotes the Bible to support his views. In Evil and The Christian Faith (pp. 118, 119) as evidence of universal salvation, he refers to Rom. 11:32 by saying, "God has consigned all men to disobedience that He might have mercy on all."

But this is mistranslation. The verse does not speak of all men. Paul's wording is "them all", which indicates that a certain class of men was intended. Then Dr. Ferre writes, "If one creature is to be eternally tormented, Christ's compassion declares that it were far better that there had been no creation." But in the verse alluded to, Christ made no mention of general creation; nor did he even say that it were better that man had not been created. What he said was that it were better for that man if he had never been born. To say that it would have been better for one man, is not to say that it would have been better absolutely. These are instances of misquotation that should not go unnoticed.

One must seriously ask whether it is good scholarship to attach the name Christian to a new religion that has so little in common with the old Christianity. This question will be accentuated by a study of Dr. Ferre's positive doctrines and his method of arriving at both the assertions and the denials. In any theology, Augustine's or Aquinas', Kierkegaard's or Schleiermacher's, Barth's or Ferre's, method determines the results. Though there may be some value in discussing details, the prior and dominating question is always the question of method.

The traditional method of Christian theology has been the acceptance of the Scriptures as the Word of God. God breathed out His message to the prophets and caused them to write it down; we study their words because God put His words into their mouths. This method Dr. Ferre decisively rejects. "The use of the Bible as the final authority for Christian truth is idolatry." He then continues, "Vehemently Jesus opposed Scribism and Pharisaism because in circumscribing religious authority to the Scriptures and the traditions, they throttled living religion."

Here again we note the distortion previously mentioned. Jesus no doubt opposed Pharisaism, but it was not because they circumscribed religious authority to the Scriptures. Dr. Ferre here joins together what God has put asunder: tradition and Scripture. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees because they transgressed the commandment of God by their tradition and made the commandment of God of none effect by "your tradition, ye hypocrites." Jesus himself maintained that the Scripture cannot be broken; and though it might be said that Moses' words were insufficient, (in the sense that Jesus and the Apostles gave us a fuller revelation, not in the sense that the Old Testament message was insufficient for salvation), Dr. Ferre gives the wrong impression by claiming that Jesus "met frantic opposition as soon as he outspokenly proclaimed that Moses' words were wrong or insufficient." Did not Jesus say, "Had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me, for he wrote of me; but if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?"

If these foregoing items, the Virgin Birth, the Atonement, and the Scriptures, are what Dr. Ferre rejects, we must now ask what does he accept? That is, we want to know not only what particular doctrines he accepts, but more, importantly how he arrives at his doctrines. What is his source of information? What is his theological method? What is his court of last appeal?

This question is not difficult to answer. Dr. Ferre makes it quite clear that his entire position, both what he accepts and what he rejects, depends on his basic concept of God. Whatever agrees with this concept may be included in his religion, but whatever does not agree must be discarded.

What then is his concept of God? For Ferre God is Agape or unlimited love. Love or Agape is not to be interpreted by the Bible. The Bible contains subagapaic themes. Agape is "indiscriminate kindness to all, as illustrated by his giving rain to both the just and the unjust alike, Agape is completely universal." This is Ferre's concept of God and on it he bases his theology.

Let us now examine this concept of God and the method that Dr. Ferre uses. First, any definition or characterization of God requires some opportunity for coming to know God. Where can a man discover anything about God's nature? Christians have historically held that this information is to be found in the Bible. But Dr. Ferre rules out the Bible, even for determining the meaning of Agape. Where then did Dr. Ferre get his information that God is indiscriminate, universal love?

One cannot discover this information in experience. Nature and history may treat all men indiscriminately, but they do not treat all men with kindness. The lives of some persons and some nations are harsh and tragic, while other people live comfortably. Experience therefore does not tell us that God is indiscriminate universal kindness. Where then did Dr. Ferre obtain his information?

I do not think Dr. Ferre can give an intelligible answer to that question. But even if he could, this information would not suffice to construct a view of theology. It would not suffice to give us a set of doctrines.

Perhaps indiscriminate kindness would rule out hell and would guarantee universal salvation, as Dr. Ferre maintains. But he also makes many statements about the Incarnation, the person of Christ, the Trinity, and many other matters, which have no definite relation to universal love. For example, does universal love require the rejection of the Virgin Birth and the acceptance of a German soldier for his father? Does Agape imply that the Persons of the Trinity are operational capacities or that we human beings can never become God? Where did Dr. Ferre get this information if it comes neither from the Bible nor from Agape either?

Whatever Dr. Ferre may think, the central motif of the Bible is not indiscriminate kindness to all people alike, but rather a particular choice of some individuals above all others. There were many idolators living in Ur, but God chose Abraham and caused him to leave his home and his idols for a city whose builder and maker is God.

At best, indiscriminate treatment of all people alike obscures God's love, God's particular electing grace. Certainly it is not true that "A more careful examination of his (Jesus') parables and teachings discloses that the central motif within them is Agape" (ibid. p.57). It is Jesus himself, not Paul or anyone else, who has the most to say about hell, outer darkness, gnashing of teeth, the worm that dieth not, and the fire that is not quenched. It is Jesus who talks about a doom that makes the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah seem tolerable. As for the parable, the wicked tenant farmers were to be ground to powder under a mighty stone; the foolish virgins were excluded from the feast -- they did not even get in late; the man with the one talent was cast out; the goats on his left hand will be sent away into everlasting punishment. It takes remarkable blindness to see Jesus as a teacher of indiscriminate kindness and universal salvation.

Presumably Dr. Ferre wishes to escape these strictures by claiming that we cannot depend on "any fanciful ipsissima verba" of Jesus; by claiming too that Jesus Himself was inconsistent (ibid. p.60); that the disciples misunderstood Him; that Jesus' vitriolic denunciation of the Pharisees is not an "authentic report in detail" (p.83); and that "we cannot know the historic Jesus" (ibid. p.S8). But on these conditions it cannot possibly be true that "The final result is a reliable, general picture" (p.S7) of Agape or of anything else whatever.

The Jesus whom Dr. Ferre portrays is found nowhere in the Bible. If the Gospels are accurate, Dr. Ferre's Jesus is proved to be an arbitrary construction, based on no literary, historical, exegetical, or objective evidence. If, on the other hand, the Gospels are as defective as he says they are, nothing reliable is obtainable. In either case it seems foolish to talk about Biblical support for Agape theology. The wisest thing to do is to use a different method and accept a different religion; to wit, the Biblical religion of verbal revelation, and its name is Christianity.

Dr. Ferre is one example of Neo-orthodoxy. Now, for a second example I should like to select a very different sort of theologian. Whereas Dr. Ferre rejected the Deity of Christ, his Virgin Birth and the sinlessness of his life, this second gentleman accepts, or at least seems to accept them all. Listen, if you please, to some of the things he has written.

Speaking of Jesus and the New Testament phrase 'Jesus is Lord', he writes "This man is the Jehovah of the Old Testament, is the Creator, is God himself" [D.O. p.85]. And on a later page he again says "Jesus Christ is God himself" [D.O. p.96-97]. Is this not a sufficiently clear assertion of the Deity of Christ?

Then concerning the Atonement, he writes: "The Son of God knew no sin ... But ... God could - and not only could, but did- ... make him to be sin for our sakes, to become ... the victim of his own condemnation and punishment ... Where we the unjust should stand, he the just now stands ... By his blood Jesus Christ has justified us ... The fact that it was God's Son, that it was God himself, who took our place on Golgotha and thereby freed us from the divine anger and judgment, reveals first the full implication of the wrath of God, of his condemning and punishing justice." [C.D. II; 397-398].

Does not this quotation express the vicarious atonement by the blood of Christ? It repeats the assertion of his Deity. It says that Christ bore our penalty and that he justified us. All this sounds very orthodox.

Next, concerning the resurrection he says, "If Jesus Christ has not risen, ... visibly and corporally risen from the dead, then he has not revealed himself as the Son of God ... In that case the whole Christian Church is based on an illusion ... And our knowledge is no dream, but the truth, and the fact that we have received that knowledge rests entirely on the Easter message literally understood," (K.G. p.87).

When in these days some ministers and theologians refuse to assert the resurrection, when they say that something must have happened but they don't know what it was, when they hem and haw and balk at the empty tomb, it is indeed refreshing to hear a great theologian basing our knowledge and the existence of the Church on the Easter message "literally understood".

Who is this great theologian? These quotations are all taken from the founder and originator of Neo-orthodoxy, Karl Barth himself. In the light of these quotations can we not say that in addition to being a great theologian, he is also an orthodox theologian? Should we not rejoice that he opposes the denials and unbelief of modernism and has called the Church back to the true faith?

Undoubtedly we should rejoice when a man, educated under the influence of modernistic, socialistic unbelief, accepts the Deity of Christ, the Virgin Birth, the Atonement, and the Resurrection. That is, we should rejoice if he really does accept these doctrines and does not deny them on some other page of his voluminous writings. Therefore we are interested in Karl Barth's complete system of theology. Is his theology orthodox? If so, why is it called Neo-orthodox? Now, the Neo-orthodox movement as a whole includes men like Dr. Ferre. Why is Barth often considered the founder of this obviously unorthodox religion? Then there is Emil Brunner, who probably accepts more Christian doctrine than Ferre', but less than Barth. What finally shall we do with Tillich, who replaces God with The Ground of All Being? How can these differing theologians all be collected into one religious movement?

The answer to this puzzling question depends mainly on their common opposition to modernism. They all rejected the superficial optimism of nineteenth century liberalism. They no longer viewed man as essentially good. The terrible wars of the twentieth century impressed them with the reality of evil, and they recognized that man could not save himself. Man needed God.

However, none of this means that they were willing to accept the Biblically based theology of Calvin and Knox. These men, whether more conservative as Barth, or more radical as in the cases of Ferre' and Tillich, have a principle of religious authority that differs from the position of the Protestant Reformers. Luther and Calvin based their theology on the Bible understood as the infallible Word of God. The Neo-orthodox build on a different foundation.

We have already seen how Dr. Ferre builds his theology on a subjective concept of Agape, which he admits is not identical with what the Bible teaches about God. Barth's foundation is somewhat better; it is not so entirely subjective; but we shall find, after examining it, that it leaves us with some unresolved problems.

In the first place it must be said that Barth has a higher opinion of the Scriptures than does Dr. Ferre'. Phrases such as, "according to the revelation attested by the Holy Scriptures", occur with some frequency. In his volume on Protestant Thought from Rousseau to Ritschl (p.146) he apparently expresses his own view by saying "The Holy Scriptures are the authoritative document for the historical truth which to the Church is identical with revelation."

Although these statements seem superficially to tend toward the infallibility of Scripture, it is more than clear that Barth does not accept infallibility. For example he says that the Bible is a human document and criticism will clarify the human form of its witness to Christ (K.G. 66ff). Indeed, for Barth God's revelation is not the Bible, but Jesus Christ. The Bible is but a witness to or attestation of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is God's revelation; other revelations lack final authority (DO. 83). In one place he contrasts Easter morning with the later apostolic "echo" in the Bible (WG. 31). The Bible is "a human document like any other and can lay no a priori dogmatic claim to special attention" (WG 60).

In the sixties, presumably in an effort to win evangelical support for Barth, Professor Marcus Barth of the University of Chicago, Karl Barth's son, wrote a letter protesting what he considered to be a misrepresentation of his father in Christianity Today. Possibly he had in mind one of my signed articles or an unsigned editorial. This is what he said: "Do you realize that my father has never said, either in his Dogmatics or in the Panel Discussions in Chicago, that the Bible does err? Christianity Today always gave the impression as if in so many words he had said precisely this."

To this accusation of inaccuracy, a correspondent, Mr. John K. Mickelson of Liverpool N.Y., in Christianity Today, Oct. 12, 1962, p.22, replied and quoted Church Dogmatics I 2., pp.528-529 "The prophets and apostles as such, even in their office, ... were real historical men as we are, and ... actually guilty of error in their spoken and written word."

Conservative scholars are not always inaccurate as the liberals often suppose.

At best Barth will accept the "main assertions" of the Bible, but not other assertions that are either false, trivial, irrelevant, or inconsistent. This view of the Bible, however, poses an insoluble problem for Neo-orthodoxy. We who believe that the Bible is the Word of God and therefore inerrant in the autographs do not face this problem. But Neo-orthodoxy cannot avoid it. The problem is this: how can one distinguish between a main assertion which we must accept and a trivial or irrelevant passage which we need not accept? Or, the question may be reworded: if two passages in the Bible are inconsistent with each other, which is the one that demands our credence?

For example, Barth appeals to Col. 1:19 to support his contention that salvation is universal and that there is no hell. Col. 1:19 therefore must be one of the main assertions in the Bible. But then it obviously follows that the dozen or so statements in which Jesus himself tells us that there really is a hell cannot be main assertions of Scripture.

Furthermore, if there are contradictions in Scripture, if Jesus teaches hell and Paul denies hell, why should we believe Paul and discredit Jesus rather than believe Jesus and ignore Paul?

This difficulty needs a little more emphasis. Obviously the Bible is not itself authoritative for the man who accepts some of it and rejects the rest. When a person decides that the Bible is wrong, either on a major doctrinal matter or on a trivial geographical detail, he is using some criterion or authority other than the Bible itself. Similarly in accepting some doctrine, for example, justification by faith, such a person cannot accept it on the Bible's own authority, for he must use another criterion by which to conclude that in this particular the Bible happens to be right. But he can never accept anything on the Bible's own say-so. Then the question arises, How could anyone know that this external criterion is correct?

Those who disbelieve the Bible hardly ever try to state the criterion by which they condemn it. Or, perhaps, they vaguely refer to science or archaeology. Or, in the case of Barth, Brunner, and others, they may blandly declare that Christianity requires us to believe both sides of a contradiction.

All three of these answers, if they should be discussed, would raise the philosophic difficulties of epistemology; and these do not fit into a short article.

Orthodox Christians may, however, conclude that while Barth is a great theologian, in the sense of possessing wide erudition, he is none the less a poor guide and leader for the Christian Church.

He is an unsatisfactory teacher for the Church because his orthodox statements do not have a firm foundation. He believes the Virgin Birth today but there is nothing in his theological method to prevent his denying it tomorrow, concluding that it is trivial, or inconsistent with some other passage, or a biological impossibility. The same holds also for the resurrection. In fact, it is more than doubtful that he believes in the resurrection at all. In spite of the amazing statement in The Knowledge of God (p.87), Barth shies away at the mention of the empty tomb, and in answer to Carl F. H. Henry's question, in a company of newspaper reporters, denied that anything happened on Easter morning that a modern newspaper reporter could have reported.

In contrast, those who accept the Scriptures as the Word of God can do theology as they sing:

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith in his excellent Word.