

The Place of The Bible in Theological Education

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Current decline in the use of the Bible by clergymen and laymen is in line with the decline of evangelical religion in the twentieth century. This trend is reflected in the home by the neglect of Bible reading in private family devotions. In many instances the use of devotional booklets is a substitute for the use of the Bible. In church schools the promotion of teaching materials from extra-biblical sources has contributed greatly to this generation's illiteracy concerning the Book. So grave has this situation become that the ministerial association of Greater Boston recently considered plans to restore the Bible to its place of supremacy in the church school curriculum. In some instances individual churches have been constrained to decline the use of denominational literature in the interest of a direct approach to the Bible.¹

Not only is the current neglect of the Bible due to a general spiritual decline but a negative "higher criticism" has resulted, quite naturally, in a feeling that the Bible is not worth intensive study. The vast amount of study expended on the Scriptures during the past nineteen centuries is explained by the fact that students regarded them as the inspired record of a divine revelation. Intrinsic merit alone would not have called forth such a prodigious effort. Where the Bible is valued only as great literature, or for its antiquarian interest, study of it, both in the orig-

inal languages and translation, naturally declines.

A third emphasis which has undergone change in the past half century is the use of the Bible in missionary work. At the opening of this century mission boards placed prime importance on the translation of the Scriptures into native dialects and promoting their widest possible distribution. This was followed by the institutional phase of missionary effort in which the larger mission boards majored on schools and hospitals, emphasizing the social aspects of the gospel. This phase may be said to have terminated with the second World War when many extensive plants were destroyed. Even at the height of the Bible emphasis in the nineteenth century there were voices raised in protest at the missionaries' ignorance concerning the Bible.² The protest went unheeded for the most part and the trend towards rationalism and towards "the social gospel" went on in the younger churches as well as in the sending churches.

While there was a surprising ignorance of the Bible fifty years ago, when Bible study was relatively prevalent, the condition today in both lay and clerical circles is appalling. No longer can it be assumed that the college graduate, entering a school of religion, has a general knowledge of the

¹ E.g., Harvard Church (Congregational), Brookline, Mass.

² E.g., W. W. White, cited by Abdel Ross Wentz, "A New Strategy for Theological Education," *Christian Education*. April, 1937, (Reprint, p. 17).

English Bible.³ The minister today finds that he can no longer assume a knowledge of the Bible on the part of his audience. Allusions to Biblical passages and narratives are less meaningful than two generations ago. This is particularly true in America. Great expository preaching, such as has characterized the Scottish ministry, is impossible without a laity that is acquainted with the Bible. It is a vicious cycle: the laymen do not know their Bible because their pastors do not preach it, the preachers do not preach it because the laymen can not appreciate expository messages. A reformation along this line could best come from the top—in theological education.

A trend towards a new discovery of the values of the Bible seems to be in the offing. Hints of it come from several sources: the reaction by "liberal" churches against the disuse of the Bible, the shock of war which has sent many, especially European Christians, to the study of "The Word," the new quest for authority in Protestantism following an era of subjectivism, an increased interest in Biblical theology, as attested by the appearance of recent books and articles on the "neo-orthodoxy,"—all these tend in the direction of a new interest in Bible study. Also, the "ecumenical reformation", in practice if not in theory, centers in Bible study.⁴ Finally, for the teaching of religion in public schools, now increasing in importance, the use of the Bible provides the only practicable way of constructive teaching without encountering doctrinal and ecclesiastical divisions. In the interest of a sound basis for unity within Protestantism, in the interest of a sound evangelism, and in

the interest of a wholesome corrective for subjectivism, this newly awakened interest in the Scriptures needs to be encouraged by all lovers of a "pure and undefiled religion."

Granting the desirability of Biblical knowledge in the pulpit and pew, the practical question of how it may be promoted is of prime practical importance. Obviously it must begin in the minister's training. Here it becomes a problem of curriculum in theological education. That a neglect of Bible study in the vernacular has characterized the curriculum of theological seminaries is widely recognized. This lack is only partially compensated for by the rise of numerous Bible colleges and institutes, during the past seventy years. Few of these, however, operate on a strictly graduate level and they are inadequate for a day when a well-trained ministry is imperative. Most "liberal" seminaries, on the other hand, have shifted their emphasis from the Biblical languages and systematic theology to social studies. These have commendably addressed themselves to an analysis of contemporary trends but in so doing have become too contemporary—they have tended to lose their perspective, their grip on the grand central truths of Christianity. This trend, promoted by rationalism and a shallow humanism, has had the effect of causing Protestantism to despise its birthright and in some cases to sell it "for a mess of pottage." The ideal, it would seem, would be to combine the Bible-centered curriculum of the Bible institute and the intellectual discipline of the theological seminary; the social relevancy of the "modernist" with the appreciation of tradition and faith voiced by the theologian—perhaps even the dialectical theologian. Such a balance is not easily attained or maintained.

Perhaps the most successful pioneering venture in this direction is the work of Wilbert W. White, founder of The Biblical Seminary in New York.

³ Cf. *Catalogue of Princeton Theological Seminary*, 1945-46, p. 19.

⁴ E.g., Editorial: "Whose Word," *Interpretation*, I, (July, 1947), 360.

⁵ Witness the prominence of Bible study among students at the Interseminary Conference at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, June 11-18, 1947.

In this institution, and those patterned after it, a curriculum with the Bible as the dynamic center is featured. This is achieved without loss to the several theological disciplines because they are regarded as growing out of Bible study. The practical advantages of majoring on the Book that is basic in Christianity, and the main source book for the parish minister, is apparent. Mastery of the content of the Bible is matched by an equal concern for the soundest pedagogical principles. Sound exegesis and a stimulus to expository preaching is the natural result of this approach. Another salutary effect is the emphasis on the Bible as the organizing center for a sound ecumenical movement—a movement which could conceivably include Catholics and Jews as well as Protestants. Actually, such a movement is ordinarily limited to evangelical Christians, to those who accept the Bible as the inspired revelation of God. The Bible is therefore regarded as transcending any one doctrinal emphasis with the result that Lutherans, Calvinists, and Arminians, can sit together to learn, rather than to marshal proof-texts for the defense of their respective positions. The resulting catholicity of spirit is consequently not the result of a compromise of basic convictions, but rather of the emancipating effect of a common center of reference, a court of appeal—the Scriptures. Success in this respect has actually been experienced in several generations of students. It has been possible largely because of the insistence that the intellectual disciplines learned in the arts and sciences be boldly applied to the defense of an inherited theological system. It also means that Biblical doctrines will not be studiously avoided, even in the interest of a specious ecumenicity. This method of direct approach is sound scholastically because it specializes in primary rather than secondary sources. It takes pains

to give more attention to what the Bible says than to what people say that it says. It seeks to produce interpreters rather than lists of interpretations, exegetes rather than exegesis. As a result students feel a remarkable degree of critical independence in their use of secondary sources. History has shown that the Harper-White emphasis on the inductive approach to the Bible is more than a nice sounding theory. Its success is seen to be not dependent on the genius of its pioneers. In fact the remarkable thing about the "re-creative method" is its adaptability to varied situations and the success which it enjoys in the hands of relatively untalented expositors. On many of the newer mission fields a Bible-centered curriculum in training schools is the accepted procedure. Some American seminaries have been alert to incorporate these principles in their curricula.⁶ This is in line also with the recommendation by the American Association of Theological Schools for a simplified and integrated curriculum. At the present time, therefore, a Bible-centered curriculum, on a professional level, is actually proving its worth as a sound, wholesome procedure in theological education.

As one anticipates the development of the next generation there is little to indicate that an extension of Biblical knowledge may be taken for granted. If such a movement occurs it will come only by taking cognizance of the need, and planning for it. To correct the errors of the past two generations, to meet the demands of this generation, and to guide the spiritual life of the next generation, a deliberate attempt to promote Bible study at the seminary level must be vigorously prosecuted. This is particularly true in the Arminian tradition where there is probably less attention given to Bible study than among Lutherans and Cal-

⁶ E.g., Union (Richmond), Princeton, Asbury.

vinists. Among the latter especially the Bible remains as the point of reference for every issue. If the result has sometimes tended to over-literalism, to a superficial intellectualism, or to too exclusive an objectivity, the general results of a Bible emphasis have been wholesome. By stressing the importance of the Bible the Calvinists have often avoided a morbid subjectivism, an unstable emotionalism, and an indifference to theology sometimes associated with pietism. The corrective for such an emphasis lies in the direction of a greater concern with and a more disciplined use of the Scriptures. Not that the Bible has been neglected in the Arminian and Wesleyan tradition — instead it is widely recognized that the Evangelical Revival was a major factor in sustaining the influence of the Bible⁷ through successive centuries of rationalism (18th), romanticism (19th), and secularism (20th). There is still room for improvement, however, on the part of evangelical Wesleyans. While evangelical Lutherans hold Bible camps and evangelical Calvinists major on Bible conferences, the evangelical Wesleyans content themselves with camp-meetings in which Christian experience is the central interest. In the latter assemblies there is not sufficient appreciation of the total message of the Bible. An unwholesome tendency is sometimes seen in the inclination to cite only those Biblical texts which support a distinctive doctrinal position. It is quite proper to have sound doctrine and to appeal to Scripture in its support but this should never eclipse an open-minded and open-hearted effort, by groups and by individuals, to discover, as an end in itself, the message of Bible books and extended Biblical passages.

The selective use of the Bible, at the expense of an expository ap-

proach, characterizes nearly all of Protestantism. Topical preaching, in which the text is used only as a pretext, is altogether too common, among both "liberals" and "conservatives." It may arise out of the preacher's inability to do sound exegesis; it may be due to indolence; it may be due to a notion that the people demand something "up-to-date." Exceptions only confirm the generalization. Textual sermons often disregard the context and fail to be truly exegetical. Meanwhile intelligent laymen tire of an atomistic and fragmentary use (or misuse) of the Bible and occasionally voice their desire for "the Word of life." A good exposition will be historically accurate, relevant to the present needs, and spiritually lucid and constructive.

A proper theological training should produce such preachers and teachers. Such preachers will be both prophets and scribes. They will study, then interpret, then proclaim. This in turn will equip them to be priests who not only can sympathize but also diagnose and correct. The churches which support theological institutions have a right to expect that the sons and daughters sent there receive this kind of training. A churchman of wide experience observes that often modern theological education is characterized by

Theological views of viewlessness too much influenced by rationalistic humanism and too timid of the bold supernaturalism of the New Testament, or else, too forensic or theoretical; great confusion over issues of applied Christianity in politics and economics and a deep concern over these questions; too little Bible study, right reading, and hard thinking⁸

The history of American Christianity discloses the fact that in far too many instances the churches have not been well served by their schools. A dry and doctrinal rationalism has again

⁷ A. C. McGiffert, *The Rise of Modern Religious Ideas*, p. 287.

⁸ Robert E. Speer, "What the Church has a right to expect from its Seminaries," *Christian Education*, XXX (June, 1947), 198.

and again vitiated the ministry's evangelical message by way of the theological school. The small denominations have too often been ill served by poorly trained ministers who have majored on a "Biblical" preaching that was a partial and perverted presentation. Such preaching produces either bigots or skeptics. In both cases a period of seclusion in a theological school has too often tended to remove the student from problems of human existence and caused him to preach "over the heads" of his people. A training that is more Biblio-centric should do much to correct this, for in what other realm does the preacher and his people feed upon the same source? It does so by centering the student's attention, not on philosophy, history, sociology, or ancient languages, but upon "everyman's Book," placing it at the center, rather than on the circumference of the student's intellectual world. He begins with the Bible but does not end there. He goes from the Bible to these other areas of investigation and then back to the Bible. Such a training is the nearest approach possible, in the seclusion of school, to that parish world for which he is preparing.

Suggestions as to how a study of the Bible, in the mother tongue, is to be correlated to other theological disciplines is in order. The area in which overlapping is most likely is in the departments of Old and New Testament. In most seminaries these departments major in ancient languages, in introduction, and in survey courses. The method of presentation is usually lectures by specialists. It is almost axiomatic that the actual use made of Greek and Hebrew after graduation is unfortunately not in proportion to the amount of effort expended on these subjects while in school. As a result some schools have dropped requirements in these fields. Without question the well-trained minister should be able to read his

Bible in the original languages. Every encouragement should be given to this discipline. The consequence of a disproportionate amount of time spent on language study and critical problems is that too little time is spent in the science of discovery and the art of exposition. An intensive exegesis of passages in the original should be balanced by analysis of the Book as a whole and by a synthesis. The student should use a telescope as well as a microscope. English Bible supplements rather than supplants the technical studies in language and historical criticism.⁹ Happy is the ministerial student if his seminary gives him training in the type of thing he will need to use throughout his ministry--studying and presenting the Bible itself. The seminary must not only furnish him with tools--languages, bibliographies, and lecture notes--it must also teach him how to use them. If the student does not experience the thrill of first-hand discovery of the Bible while in school, it is less likely that he will later on. If the seminary does not help him to acquire the sense of authority that comes from direct contact with primary sources he may be dependent on "helps" for the rest of his life. A well trained student will not be arrogantly independent of scholarly aids nor will he be slavishly dependent on them. It is more important that seminary graduates carry with them a sense of authority derived from correct exegesis than be able to quote authorities; it is better to learn a method of interpretation than a multitude of interpretations.

The Bible will stimulate a curiosity for history. It is sound pedagogy to arouse interest before introducing a subject. It will not be a decision between history or Bible, rather a study of a Bible book will include an

⁹ H. T. Kuist, "The Use of the Bible in the Forming of Men," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, June 1944, (Reprint, pp. 7f).

investigation of the historical situation out of which the book was produced. Subsequent history will be more meaningful if it is viewed as the unfolding of the Biblical stream of tradition through the centuries. Training in historical research will, in turn, have a wholesome effect on the Bible student: it will give him objectivity, discrimination, and perspective.

The Bible may well serve as the springboard to philosophical studies. The Wisdom Literature of the Scriptures, the Apocrypha, reflections of Gnosticism in the New Testament, the Septuagint, all form a bridge between the Bible and Greek and Oriental thought. Subsequent development in western thought cannot be understood apart from the influence of the Bible. The constant cross reference between the Bible and philosophical systems of the past and present will be facilitated by the student's thorough acquaintance with the Bible as a whole. As a matter of fact this is the way it has actually occurred in thousands of instances -- a foundation in Biblical knowledge and Christian experience almost inevitably whets the appetite for knowledge and integrates the learning process.

In practical theology the relation is intimate. Sound exegesis, lucid exposition, and an adequate grounding in the panorama of Scripture are indispensable to homiletical skill. The who is most saturated with the Law, the Prophets, and the Gospel, will be the best fitted, other things being equal, for the practical problems of the parish ministry. The young minister is fortunate if his grounding in Scripture is sufficiently thorough that the range of his sympathies, the clarity of his insight, the courage of his leadership, will be readily forthcoming when emergencies arise in the course of a busy post of service. This is not a matter of dexterity in quoting Scripture, an expertness in manipulating

texts and analyses. It is having the "burden" of the prophets and apostles in one's blood-stream so that the "spirit" as well as the "letter" becomes part of the minister's very being.

If the use of the Bible in English promotes a Biblical, rather than a systematic theology, the result will not be unwholesome. It will have the effect of avoiding doctrinal "hobbies", promoting a more vital evangelism, and contributing to a greater degree of toleration: the closer to the Bible the closer to each other.

The greater service that a seminary can furnish the church and the world is not a curriculum, but men who know God, who exemplify His nature, and who are determined to work His will. As one noted trainer of ministers has put it,

Not the Scriptures alone, not a well ordered curriculum alone, not educative processes alone, but personalities who know their Bible better than any other book and are able to use the Bible intelligently in actual life situations—these are the true objectives of the Biblio-centric procedure. The aim is a mastery of the Bible by contact with the book itself, a mastery that the student has himself achieved under the guidance of a teacher. It is a mastery that enables the student to enter personally into possession of the wealth of the Scriptures and to acquire, not facts, not predigested schemes, not the tricks of a trade, not a mere mechanical expertness, but a genuine apprehension and a method of study that becomes both his technical equipment of skills and his source of life.¹⁰

It is the writer's conviction that the direct study of the Bible in English is the greatest need in American schools of theology, that such a discipline need not supplant but rather gives stimulus and intergration to the disciplines, and that the use of the Bible as the center of integration is consistent with the highest standards of pedagogy. Experience has confirmed the theory that the direct approach to the Christian's source book

¹⁰ Abdel Ross Wentz, "A New Strategy for Theological Education," *Christian Education*, April, 1938, (Reprint, p. 28).

tones up the student's whole mental and spiritual life by insisting on a discipline in method as well as a mastery of content. It has been demonstrated that concentration in one field and the relating of other fields to it is sounder strategy than giving the student a smattering of widely diverse and unrelated subjects. Such an emphasis on the mastery of the Bible, in the language in which it will later be used, will bear fruit in a rich and well-balanced gospel ministry. When it is recalled that nearly every vigorous spiritual awakening in Christian history originated in or was accompanied by the people's access to the Book, it is evident that such a pro-

cedure in theological training may well issue in a new and much-needed Reformation. Better use of the Bible may not guarantee that result but it is unlikely indeed that such a result will come except by the use of this means. Certainly the seminaries owe it to God, and this generation, to take every effort to make themselves "an instrument which the Living Spirit of God in His unpredictable and sovereign movement might find adequate to His present Purpose for His Church."¹¹

¹¹ H. P. VanDusen, "The Church Tomorrow: The Role of the Seminaries," *The Fourteenth Meeting of the American Association of Theological Schools*, Bulletin 16, June, 1944, p. 30.