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Battling for the Bible—Then and Now

'God has spoken' (Heb. 1:1): this exciting affirmation stands at the heart of Christian faith. God is not an unknown and unknowable being, but has graciously made himself and his will known in history, above all in Jesus Christ.

But how do we today know what God revealed of himself in history? Traditionally Christians have answered: God ensured that his historical self-revelation was preserved for us by the inspired authors of the Bible. Jesus himself certainly regarded the Old Testament as God-given witness to God-given revelation; and his appointment of apostles to be his authoritative witnesses led ultimately to the formation and canonization of the New Testament. So through Old and New Testaments the light of God's revelation continues to shine.

That traditional view has, of course, been under attack in theological circles for many years. Over a century ago Dean Burgon, whose ideas are explained in a historical study in this edition of *Themelios*, was battling for the recognition of the Bible as God's infallible Word against the then up-and-coming critical movement, which treated the Bible 'like any other book'. The battle has continued, and the view of the Bible as God's wholly reliable Word has often been given up, even recently in scholarly Roman Catholic circles that were once so conservative; thus the brilliant Hans Küng, subject of another article, combines his affirmation of justification by faith with his denial of papal *and* scriptural infallibility.

Looking back on Burgon's views a century later, we may feel that his position was inadequate in certain ways. Thus his suspicion of biblical criticism may seem to us too extreme, since we know that the critical movement, for all its faults, has helped us to understand new things about the Bible and its interpretation. Also he does not consider, let alone answer, some of the important modern questions about the intention of the biblical authors and about the nature of their writings.

But to blame Burgon for not considering modern questions is perhaps hardly fair. On the other side we believe that Burgon was quite right to see that we must maintain our faith in the Bible as the true Word of God if we are to maintain Christian faith at all—that is, if we are to have any meaningful understanding of God having revealed himself in history. Without a true Bible, where do we go to find out God's revelation? To the church? Protestants have long recognized what Küng has recognized: that the church is fallible. Individual judgment and conscience are even less reliable: different Christians may think that they have the Spirit of God, but come up with widely differing opinions. Unless there is some Spirit-given norm outside of us, we will have no court of appeal for deciding what is truly Christian and what is not. Of course, even given an agreed biblical

norm, Christians will differ in their interpretation of parts of it, just as lawyers differ in their interpretation of legal documents; but such differences are nothing compared to the basic and unresolvable differences that we will have if we have no agreement on where the Word of God is to be found.

Endorsing Burgon's concern to battle for the Bible does not mean that we will necessarily agree with all of his 'battle positions'; we may feel that he—and indeed some modern evangelical apologists—have failed to answer satisfactorily some of the questions thrown up by critical scholarship. On the other hand, we see no reason to believe that criticism has undermined his basic position; and we today can and should stand with him in our concern to guard the revealed gospel of Christ and to work out satisfactory answers to difficult questions.

To end an editorial on the Bible on an intellectual note about belief would be to leave something vital unsaid. The only reason for battling for the Bible is in order that the Word of God may be heard and obeyed. If one of the devil's ways of preventing us hearing God's Word is to undermine our confidence in the Bible, another of his potent devices is to blind us—even the most orthodox of us—to what God wants to say to us through the Bible. Evangelical Christians, who battle enthusiastically for the Bible's truth, must be the first to search out and to apply what it has to say to their own beliefs, traditions and lives.

Much of the material in this issue of Themelios was passed on to the editor by his predecessor, Dr Robert Norris. Our sincere thanks go to Dr Norris for all his work.

The contemporary relevance of Christendom's creeds

Bruce A. Demarest

Dr Demarest has been Reviews Editor of Themelios for some years. His article appeared first in the Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society in 1978; we are grateful for permission to reprint it.

1. Origin of the creeds

A creed, or rule of faith, is a concise statement of what one must believe in order to be a Christian. Certain fathers in the west, beginning with Cyprian, introduced the term 'symbol' (*i.e.*, 'sign' or 'instrument of identification') to denote those articles of faith that differentiated the Christian from the pagan or Jew. Ostensibly the church's creedal formulae were grounded in the Word of God. Augustine in his treatise, 'On the Creed', defined the Symbol as a brief compendium of divine truths that lie scattered across the pages of Scripture.

Significantly, Christianity is the only major religion that has drafted detailed creedal statements. Biblical and post-biblical Judaism confessed Yahweh's absolute uniqueness through its *Shema*: 'Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD' (Dt. 6: 4). A simple creed patterned on the *Shema* was employed in the liturgy of the Qumran community. But neither Islam nor such eastern religions as Hinduism, Buddhism or Shintoism have developed detailed creedal formulae.

The genesis of the church's formal symbols resides in the protocreedal statements of faith and worship that lie embedded in the NT. Paul, recalling Jesus' arraignment before the Roman governor (Jn. 18: 33-38), declares that the Lord 'in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession' (1 Tim. 6: 13). The Lord himself commanded prospective disciples publicly to confess their faith (Mt. 10: 32-33). Thus Nathaniel (Jn. 1: 49), Martha (11: 27), Peter (Mt. 16: 16) and the Roman officer (27: 54) confessed Jesus to be God's promised Messiah.

Later when post-Pentecost believers had gained a clear and settled faith they pointedly acknowledged Jesus as 'Lord' (1 Cor. 12: 3; Rom. 10: 9), thereby attributing to the Nazarene the sovereign deity that Israel reserved for Yahweh alone. Further reflection on God's saving revelation in Jesus led the church to confess further dimensions of Christ's reality. Paul in Romans 10: 9-10 outlines three essentials of a

confession that saves: belief in Jesus' deity, his atoning death, and his resurrection. Hymnodic texts such as Romans 1: 4, 1 Corinthians 15: 3-5 and 1 Peter 3: 18 undoubtedly reflect the protocreedal formula common in the early church, 'Jesus died and rose.' According to 1 Corinthians 8: 6 Christians confessed God the Father as creator and sustainer of the universe and Jesus Christ as the divine agent of this cosmic activity. Hence Schaff is quite correct when he states, 'In a certain sense the Christian church has never been without a creed'.¹

But the NT contains a further level of protocreedal formulae—namely, a convert's confession of Christ at baptism. Paul in 1 Timothy 6: 12-13 commends Timothy for 'the good confession' (note the definite article) he made in the presence of many witnesses—no doubt on the occasion of his baptism. An interpolated text preserved in a 'Western' recension of the account of the Ethiopian chamberlain probably reflects the early Christian baptismal rite. When the Ethiopian asked, 'What is to prevent my being baptized?' Philip replied, 'If you believe with all your heart, you may'. Whereupon the convert confessed, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God' (Acts 8: 36-37).

The Old Roman Symbol, an early-second-century formula (AD 140, Harnack) developed by the church at Rome, is undoubtedly an expanded baptismal confession. The earliest form of the Symbol develops the primitive confession of Christ along trinitarian lines: 'I believe in God the Father Almighty and in Christ Jesus his Son, our Lord, and in the Holy Spirit, the holy Church, and the resurrection of the flesh.' The apostolic fathers reflect what J. N. D. Kelly calls 'quasi-creedal scraps', and the apologists a growing corpus of teaching that represents the essence of Christianity. In the writings of Irenaeus in the second century and Tertullian in the third we witness the development of a simple 'rule of truth' or 'rule of faith' that converts confessed at baptism.² The so-called Apostles' Creed, which slowly evolved from the Old

¹ P. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (New York, 1919), 1. 5.

² For a full account of the emergence of formal creedal statements in the second- and third-century church see B. Shelley, *By What Authority* (Grand Rapids, 1965).

Roman Symbol, originally served as a confession of faith at baptism—so the singular 'I' and the triune form analogous to our Lord's threefold baptismal formula in Matthew 28: 19. Later the church gave the Apostles' Creed a central place in its corporate worship.

In the fourth century the simple baptismal confessions were succeeded by more elaborate doctrinal creeds that mirror the church's corporate faith-consciousness. With the rise of heterodox teaching the church was forced to examine and articulate those faith commitments it regarded as non-negotiable. We include among the church's principal doctrinal formulae the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Definition of Chalcedon and the Athanasian Creed. In its struggles against the Arians, who postulated a creaturely Christ, the church at Nicaea (AD 325) with some later modifications affirmed the co-equality of Christ and the Spirit with the Father. Building on earlier Palestinian and Syrian baptismal confessions, Nicaea confessed Christ's eternal generation, pre-existence, incarnation, resurrection, ascension and second coming.

In the fifth century the church was forced to address Apollinarian, Nestorian and Monophysite misrepresentations of the union of deity and humanity in the God-man. Thus the church at Chalcedon (AD 451) confessed the reality of Christ's deity and humanity, the integrity of the union of the two natures in the one person, and the preservation of the characteristics of each nature 'without confusion, change, division or separation'.

The final symbol, the so-called Athanasian Creed, evolved as a means of countering modalistic teaching, which reduced the Son and Spirit to divinities of lesser rank. The latter creed, which developed from certain expositions of the Apostles' Creed and which appeared in southern France about AD 490, is in two parts. The first section (vv. 3-28) presents a rational explication of the doctrine of the Trinity, confessing the tripersonality of Father, Son and Holy Spirit within the unity of the divine essence. The second section (vv. 29-44) rehearses the main outlines of the Chalcedonian Christology.

These four doctrinal formulae—the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Chalcedonian Definition and the Creed of Athanasius—represent the bedrock conviction of the early church. Their common focus is the redeeming incarnation of Christ, the Lord and very Son of God. The church employed these creedal statements not only to counter heresy but also to regulate baptism, order its corporate worship and shape its catechetical instruction. Our next task is to assess the authority

accorded these creeds by the main branches of the Church.

2. Authority of the creeds

Historically, Catholic Christianity has held that the ultimate theological authority is the corpus of living tradition. The Greek Orthodox Church ascribes total authority to the decrees of the seven ecumenical councils, from the first Council of Nicaea (AD 325) to the second at Nicaea (AD 787). Although the eastern churches have never accepted the western doctrinal creeds (rejecting especially the *filioque* clause), they regard the Nicene Creed in its Constantinopolitan revision as the infallible rule of the faith.

Rome, on the other hand, claims infallibility for all the pronouncements of the church's magisterium. Christ founded the church and ordained that it should be the infallible guardian and interpreter of the truth (Mt. 18: 20; Jn. 16: 13; Lk. 22: 32). Inspired by the Spirit of God, the church's councils cannot err. Justinian I (d. 565) regarded the teachings of the first four ecumenical councils as the Word of God and their canons as the law of the empire. Gregory the Great (d. 604) placed the decrees of the first four councils on a par with the teaching of the four Gospels. Mediaeval Catholicism, in its full bloom, elevated the creeds above the Bible. The Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian Creeds were known as 'the three symbols'. According to Ludolf of Saxony 'the first symbol was made for instruction in the faith, the second for explanation of the faith, and the third for defence of the faith'. Hence from the perspective of Rome the ancient creedal formulae contain truths immediately revealed by God and thus authoritative for all time.

Whereas Rome regarded the creeds as oracles from God, the Protestant Reformers accepted the Apostles' Creed and the decrees of the first four councils because of their agreement with Holy Scripture, the only rule of faith and practice. Luther held a somewhat lower view of the creeds *vis-à-vis* the Bible than leaders of other branches of the Reformation church. Yet Luther appreciatively expounded the creeds both in sermons and in his Small and Large Catechism. In a sermon on Romans 11: 33-36 Luther said the following about the Apostles' Creed:

This confession of faith we did not make or invent, neither did the fathers of the church before us. But as the bee gathers honey from many a beautiful and delectable flower, so this creed has been collected in commendable brevity from the books of the beloved prophets and apostles, that

is, from the entire Holy Scriptures.³

Calvin likewise accepted the formulae of the early ecumenical councils: 'I venerate them from my heart, and would have all of them held in due honour.'⁴ Their teachings are holy because they contain the authentic interpretation of Scripture against the cavils of the heretics. Calvin was convinced that no better forum existed for the determination of right doctrine than 'a council of true bishops' guided by the Spirit of Christ.⁵ Yet he concedes that the church has known faithful councils and faithless councils. To distinguish between the two, Calvin proposed several tests. The intentions of a council and the fidelity of its members must be weighed. But ultimately the deliberations of a council must be measured against the norm of Scripture. In Calvin's judgment, the formulae of 'that golden age' from Nicaea to Chalcedon satisfy these criteria. Certain later decrees stem from a corrupt era of the church and must be set aside as unlawful. In sum, then, Calvin held that the formulae produced by the faithful councils warrant the church's highest respect.

Anglicanism identified Scripture as the ultimate test of truth, although according considerable importance to the historical voice of the church. Thus Article 8 of the Thirty-Nine Articles reads, 'The Three Creeds, Nicene Creed, Athanasius's, and that . . . commonly called the Apostles' Creed, ought thoroughly to be received and believed: for they may be proved by the most certain warrants of holy Scripture.' A. C. Headlam evaluates the Church of England's estimate of the creeds in these words: 'The witness of the early church has great authority in corroborating what Scripture has handed down and in telling us the proportions of the Christian faith.'⁶

In their quest for radical renewal of the church the Puritans emphasized the Word of God above all human traditions. The Westminster Confession of Faith (1648) refers to the Word of God as the supreme judge of 'all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men' (I. x), seeing that 'symbols or councils since the apostles' times . . . may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice' (XXXI.iv). Yet the Shorter Catechism (1647) closes with a recitation of the Apostles' Creed (alongside the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer), and describes the Creed in an addendum as 'a brief

sum of the Christian faith, agreeable to the Word of God, and anciently received in the Churches of Christ'.⁷

3. Depreciation of the creeds

It is clear that historically the main branches of Christendom upheld the creeds as faithful synopses of biblical truth. However, radical subjectivism introduced by the theological enlightenment (1650-1800) led to a gradual depreciation of their validity. Stimulated by a burgeoning scientism and by man's frenzied quest for 'release from his self-incurred tutelage' (Kant), and facilitated by the decay of eighteenth-century Protestant scholasticism, rationalistic religion sought emancipation from every ecclesiastical authority, including the creeds.

Few critics have done more to undermine confidence in the creeds than Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930), the renowned historian of dogma. Harnack postulated that the simple, non-metaphysical religion of Jesus was corrupted by the assimilation of alien Greek philosophical concepts. What Harnack called the 'acute secularization' of Christianity began with the formation of the Logos Christology, developed with the Apostles' Creed, and culminated in the Nicene dogma of the Trinity and the Chalcedonian dogma of the Christ. 'This development,' Harnack argued, effected 'the definite transformation of the rule of faith into the compendium of a Greek philosophical system'.⁸ Thus the whole Catholic creedal deposit of Trinity, incarnation and atonement must be discarded as the first step toward a return to an authentic, non-dogmatic religion. In his 1902 essay, *The Essence of Christianity*, Harnack exulted in the fact that his was a religion 'without priests, without dogma, without sacraments, without liturgy, a truly spiritual religion'.

In our own century Cecil John Cadoux, the British theologian, followed Harnack in claiming that the Nicene Creed, for instance, 'has made many weighty additions to the simple profession of faith in Christ'.⁹ Modern Christians find little historical evidence for such dogmas as Jesus' pre-existence, virgin birth and bodily resurrection. Cadoux said of the fathers who framed the creeds: 'Their cosmology was geocentric, their eschatology in origin Jewish, their philosophy Stoic or Platonic: their views of historical evidence, Scriptural authority, and human personality were of necessity such as cannot be adopted by us today.'¹⁰ Such considerations,

³ P. Schaff, *Creeds*, 3. 704.

⁴ A. Harnack, *History of Dogma* (London, 1896-1899), 2, p. 380.

⁵ C. J. Cadoux, *Catholicism and Christianity* (New York, 1929), p. 238.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

³ Trinity Sunday Sermon, 1535. WA, 41. 275.

⁴ J. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.ix.1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, IV.ix.13.

⁶ A. C. Headlam, *Christian Theology* (Oxford, 1934), p. 82.

Cadoux concludes, release us from any serious consideration of the ancient formulae.

It is evident that the creeds retain little cash value in the entire modern liberal tradition. Existentialist sympathizers of Tillich, Bultmann, and J. A. T. Robinson, who plead the mythical character of the incarnation, cross, resurrection and second coming, regard the creeds as curious relics of a superstitious age. One recalls Bultmann's claim that Jesus is the divinely-appointed messenger of the kingdom (he is not God in the sense of Nicaea or Chalcedon), or Robinson's assertion that the supernaturalist framework of the Chalcedonian and Athanasian Creeds is incomprehensible to the modern mind.

Gordon Kaufman's claim that the sole arbiter of truth is the theologian's historical judgment also tends to evacuate the creeds of their validity and relevance. He argues that 'the theologian . . . neither has the right simply to reproduce the earliest documentary witnesses (the biblical accounts), nor merely to express the consensus of the Christian community; he must present his own understanding of the act of God to which church and Bible also witness'.¹¹ The work of the theologian is analogous to that of the historian. 'Just as the historian often finds it necessary to correct both his primary and secondary sources . . . in the light of the reconstruction which he finally produces, so the theologian frequently needs to reinterpret and amend the portrayal of Jesus Christ which he finds in Scripture and tradition.'¹² Kaufman concedes that something can be learned from Christians of other ages. However,

our efforts and our seeing must finally be our own. We are 20th century men, who know modern physics and psychoanalysis, Communist tyranny and Hiroshima, Freud and Marx, Einstein and Hitler; but we must seek to grasp God's historical act in terms we can understand and accept and believe.¹³

Randolf Crump Miller rounds out our survey of modern Protestant attitudes toward the creeds. According to Miller, critical analysis reveals that the ancient formulae were based on 'bad science, confused theology, and an outmoded view of Scripture'.¹⁴ Thus the creeds must not be used as final tests of doctrine. Nevertheless, they are not entirely useless. 'When the creeds are seen as symbols of a common commitment rather than as a

guide for specific beliefs, they serve a liturgical purpose that is effective today.'¹⁵

The Local Church of Witness Lee, while claiming to be ruthlessly biblical, radically depreciates the ancient creeds. Witness Lee, Gene Ford and others argue that the end of the first century marks the genesis of the church's doctrinal and moral decline. Hence 'the historic Christian church' is, in fact, the degraded, apostate church of Christendom. The conciliar creeds merely reflect the character of a dead and degraded church.

On the Catholic side we have noted that Rome held an inflated view of the creeds, postulating their divine origin and infallibility. Through a radical about-face the New Catholicism now consistently depreciates the relevance of the creeds by postulating their timebound character. Nineteenth-century Roman Catholic modernism precipitated recent developments by claiming that at no point in its history has the church been in complete possession of the truth. The definition of dogma as a timelessly valid formula was challenged by George Tyrrell (1861-1909), the Dublin-born revisionist. Tyrrell was sceptical of the traditional Catholic belief that Christ and the apostles infallibly delivered the 'deposit of faith' (sacraments, creeds and dogmas) to Peter's successors. Truth is not a corpus of concrete doctrines but a basic spiritual impulse that progressively unfolds in Christian experience and whose theological formulation requires constant modification. For Tyrrell, religion is a 'life that unfolds itself, like an organism, from age to age, that exhibits an immense variety of species and genera in different times and places, in all of which, collectively, its potentiality is progressively disclosed.'¹⁶ Hence the 1900 year practice of ascribing to the creeds an eternal relevance is sheer 'theologism' or 'pseudo-science'.

Alfred Loisy (1857-1940), the founder of Catholic modernism in France, mocks the traditional church in his *Memoires* for 8 July 1883: 'Are you simple enough to suppose that the Trinity of the Council of Nicaea is the Trinity of the Gospel and the early Fathers? . . . I know what men have produced your symbols. What use is it to tell me again you have received them from heaven?' Tradition has ossified into traditionalism, faith has been frozen to a formula. Loisy confessed that he did not accept any article of the Catholic Creed, save that Jesus had been 'crucified under Pontius Pilate'.

Ironically, the New Catholicism's depreciation of the creeds was reinforced by Vatican II's renewed

¹¹ G. Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York, 1969), p. 70.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 71.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁴ R. C. Miller, *This We Can Believe* (New York, 1976), p. 33.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 170, 171.

¹⁶ In B. M. G. Reardon, *Roman Catholic Modernism* (London, 1970), p. 149.

emphasis on Scripture.¹⁷ Progressives at the Council succeeded in supplanting Rome's traditional two-source theory with the rule of the material sufficiency of the Bible alone. But in postulating Scripture as the ultimate referent, the New Catholicism adopted the critical interpretation of the Bible owned by radical Protestant scholarship. Hence when modern Catholic scholars conclude that critical science demands the reinterpretation of such doctrines as the nature of God, the atonement, or the resurrection, inevitably a chasm is created between the traditional creeds and the new consensus.

The New Catholicism argues that a distinction must be drawn between the substance of a theological truth and its formulation in any given era. As expressed by the Vatican II document, 'Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World',¹⁸ 'theologians are now being asked . . . to seek out more efficient ways . . . of presenting their teaching to modern man: for the deposit and the truths of faith are one thing, the manner of expressing them is quite another'. The divine revelation, then, must be experienced and expressed in new ways appropriate to new times. The danger exists, however, that the core of truth in this insight may be seriously abused. In the final analysis, it appears that the New Catholicism really affirms that the old creedal formulae actually misrepresent the truth as it is understood today.¹⁹

Briefly we observe how this bifurcation between the timeless deposit and the timebound formula is reflected in contemporary Catholic theology. Karl Rahner differentiates between the 'primordial utterance of revelation' and the church's understanding of the gospel at any point in its history. Through the church's shared experience of Christ, the eternal truth of God is more fully perceived and more authentically formulated. Thus revelation becomes progressively actualized through the church's creative reflection on the gospel. Hence the ancient conciliar formulae about the Trinity or Christ are necessarily inadequate formulations of the truth. The modern theological task demands of the church a willingness to reformulate new questions and raise new issues, where agreement with traditional doctrine cannot be guaranteed in

advance.²⁰

Edward Schillebeeckx, the Flemish Dominican, stresses that every doctrinal assertion is relative to the milieu in which the formula arose. A statement that is true in one context may, indeed, prove untrue in another context. Since truth is progressively actualized through the ongoing historical process, it is 'possible for the articulation of a dogma to be discarded without any necessary denial of the dogma itself'.²¹ It follows that the historically formulated creeds are in no wise binding on the church for all times.

Hans Küng has crusaded to root out every temporal claim of infallibility—be it by Bible, church or pope. He describes the church as 'scholastic, legalistic, hierarchical, centralistic, sacramentalistic, traditionalistic, exclusive and often superstitious'.²² It follows that 'everywhere . . . the magisterium, which in fact is represented by sinful and erring human beings, has erred'.²³ The church is guilty of gross manipulation of the truth for imposing its creeds and dogmas as binding formularies. Concludes Küng:

Thus it is clear that ecumenical councils are not 'inspired' by the Spirit but are only 'assisted' by the Spirit. The definitions of ecumenical councils are not the Word of God; rather, as human statements they testify indirectly (with assistance from the Spirit) to the revelation of God.²⁴

The liberty that post-Vatican-II Catholicism has taken to modify the classical creeds is clearly highlighted in the 1966 Dutch New Catechism.²⁵ In this contemporary exposition of the faith serious aspersions are cast on the validity of the following traditional doctrines: the tri-unity of the Godhead, creation of the world *ex nihilo*, the existence of a moral law universally binding on mankind, the origin and propagation of sin from Adam, and Jesus' satisfaction for sins by his death on the cross.

In its broad theological outlook as well as in its disparagement of the creeds the New Catholicism betrays a marked convergence with radical Protestant thought that only a few years ago would have been thought inconceivable.

¹⁷ K. Rahner, 'Pluralism in Theology and the Unity of the Church's Profession of Faith', *Concilium* 46 (June 1969), pp. 103 ff.

¹⁸ E. Schillebeeckx, 'The Problem of the Infallibility of the Church's Office', *Concilium* 46 (June 1969), p. 92.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

²¹ H. Küng, *Structures of the Church* (Notre Dame, 1968), p. 53.

²² English translation: *A New Catechism: Catholic Faith for Adults* (New York, 1967).

¹⁷ See the 'Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation', esp. ch. 6, in A. P. Flannery, ed., *Documents of Vatican II* (Grand Rapids, 1975), pp. 762-765.

¹⁸ Par. 62, *Documents of Vatican II*, p. 966.

¹⁹ G. C. Berkouwer, *The Second Vatican Council* (Grand Rapids, 1965), p. 23: 'The Pope's distinction between the truth and its formulation seemed to open the door to a new interpretation of church dogma.'

4. Why the devolution of the creeds?

At this point we want to draw together those factors that have led to radical depreciation of the creeds in the modern world. The first is the postulate of the subjective nature of truth. In the post-enlightenment world of Kant, Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard and the whole twentieth-century existentialist tradition, it is assumed that the reality of God cannot be objectively conceptualized. Truth has nothing to do with questioning the nature of God as he is in himself. Rather, truth is attained by exploring the intrinsic character of human existence. Thus Rahner insists that 'the content of faith is not seen as a vast, almost incalculable number of propositions which, collectively and severally, are guaranteed by the formal authority of a God who reveals Himself'.²⁶ The gospel is 'God's sole, total, and fundamentally simple answer to the sole, total question which man asks of his own existence'.²⁷ J. A. T. Robinson stresses the subjective character of truth in these words: 'The question of truth is always for the Christian, as Kierkegaard insisted, an existential one. His is not simply Pilate's question, "What is Truth?", but "What is my relation to the truth, what is true for me?"'²⁸ Concludes Robinson, "The "deposit" of truth once delivered to the saints now sounds less like something laid down (like wine) than something washed up (like salt): the metaphor has subtly shifted."²⁹

Clearly, devolution of the creeds is a logical consequence of the modern rejection of objective truth. One empathizes with Kierkegaard's scorn of a cold and lifeless orthodoxy that fails to grip man in the depth of his being. But we reject the notion that the resurrection of the affective dimension of the truth must be preceded by the burial of its objective and cognitive character. Truth is more than modernism's mystical assent to something about which one can know almost nothing.

A second factor that has precipitated the demise of the creeds is the contemporary stress on orthopraxis over against orthodoxy. Modern Catholic progressives such as Schillebeeckx, Dulles and Küng insist that what counts is not a Christian's creed but his concrete deed. It is relatively simple to profess belief in the God of the Bible and yet fail to live Christianly in the world. Hence the ultimate datum is a life of discipleship rather than assent to any creedal formula. For Küng, maintenance of the truth is nothing less than following in the footsteps

of Jesus. This kind of activist faith cannot be annulled, even by the wrong kinds of propositions.

Genuine concern for concrete demonstration of Christian faith in the world can only be applauded. But surely the only guarantee of a responsible biblical orthopraxis is an authentic biblical orthodoxy, such as faith has enshrined in the creeds. There can be no integrity of life apart from integrity of belief.

A third factor is the appeal to cultural relativism. Critics point to the vast cultural chasm that separates Bible and creed from the modern scientific outlook. The recent report of the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England states that 'past beliefs and formulations' are 'inevitably relative to the culture of the age which produced them'.³⁰ Charles Hartshorne speaks for the modern critical mind when he argues that the entire classical theological tradition is in bondage to a set of metaphysical concepts that are alien to the Christian message. Since the creeds thus reflect the bankruptcy of Greek patristic theology, it is necessary to 're-mythologize' its thought forms and imagery in terms meaningful to modern man.

But it is hardly responsible to argue that the use of fourth- or fifth-century concepts and language necessarily invalidates the message of the creeds. Undoubtedly the early church selected from its reservoir of conceptual forms the most adequate 'disclosure models' (Aldwinckle) by which to articulate its understanding of the gospel. That many older disclosure models speak to us today is confirmed by the fact that the great classics of literature, music and art communicate with power across temporal and cultural boundaries. The hallmark of a great art form is its timeless, universal appeal to humankind. One questions whether the conceptual and linguistic forms employed by modern Tillichians, Whiteheadians or Rahnerians are any more relevant and intelligible than those of the early Christian creeds. A good case can be made for the thesis that the modern process view of reality, for example, is less agreeable with the facts than the world view of Nicaea or Chalcedon.

Whereas the form of a given creed may be open to modernization, the content of bedrock Christian conviction preserved therein must be taken seriously. Contemporary neologists who abandon the creeds' content because of quarrels with their form seriously err.

As noted earlier, theories of development of dogma have seriously undermined confidence in the creeds. John Henry Newman in his 'Essay on the

²⁶ K. Rahner, *Belief Today* (New York, 1967), p. 71.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

²⁸ J. A. T. Robinson, *The Difference in Being a Christian Today* (Philadelphia, 1972), p. 37.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

³⁰ *Christian Believing* (London, 1976), p. 37.

Development of Christian Doctrine' (1845) postulated that dogma is not a fixed and unchangeable deposit but an organism that matures and evolves. The Anglican convert to Rome enunciated the principle of 'dynamic identity', whereby the original seed of revelation could retain its identity through the long process of development. Newman thus concluded that no doctrinal formula from the past is adequate for the present. In every generation the gospel must be submitted to searching reformulation.

Karl Rahner, a student of Heidegger at Marburg, has been a vigorous proponent of the thesis that faith presents itself in ever-changing forms. Dogma necessarily evolves, since revelation is a continually unfolding reality in the church. The biblical writers witnessed the primordial revelation. Yet through revelatory dialogue with God the church through the ages penetrates ever more deeply into the Christian mysteries. The magisterium's solemn proclamation of the church's growing perception of the truth produces the formal development of dogma in history. Given the reality of doctrinal development, it follows that the ancient creeds must be superseded by more authentic representations of the divine reality.

The theory of dogmatic development rests on the false premise that special revelation is an ongoing reality in the church. But God, in fact, has given a complete and infallible self-disclosure in Scripture and in Jesus of Nazareth. The church's growth in knowledge through reflection and dialogue with history must be attributed to Holy Spirit illumination and human interpretation of general revelation rather than to fresh special revelation.

The thesis that dogma has retained its essential identity through the process of historical maturation is more a romantic supposition than a hard fact. One need only compare Pope Pius XII's 'Syllabus or Summary of the Main Errors of our Age' (1864) with the doctrinal platform of Vatican II a century later to discover that the very 'errors' proscribed by Pius have been promulgated by Vatican II. One is forced to the conclusion that the modern reinterpretation of the creed, in fact, empties the formula of its original meaning and turns it into its very opposite. Only a dreamy-eyed dialectician can live with the simultaneous affirmations and negations made by the developmental theorists.

5. Contemporary relevance of the creeds

Estimates of the creeds' worth have varied widely, from traditional Roman Catholic and Orthodox deification of the formulae to modernism's thorough rejection of their validity. In search of an authentic

estimate of the creeds we are forced to reject both these extremes. More valuable is the older Protestant insight, that the classical creeds are a *norma normata* rather than a *norma normans*.

First, the creeds should not be regarded as a *norma normans*—'a rule that rules'. We dissent from Catholic tradition, which postulates that the authority of the ancient creeds is absolute and infallible. The ecumenical councils were not organs of infallibility, and their formulae were not *logia* from God.

On the other hand, the creeds should be viewed as a *norma normata*—'a rule that is ruled'. Note in the first place that the creed is a rule. If we desist from divinizing the creed, neither do we depreciate its intrinsic worth and relevance. We acknowledge that the creeds reflect the overwhelming faith-consciousness of the early church. In the words of St Vincent of Lerins, the creeds embody 'that which has been believed everywhere, always and by all'. The Apostles' Creed, the Nicene and Chalcedonian Creeds, and the Athanasian Creed affirm those core truths of the gospel embraced by the church from the beginning. With Dorner we hold that the creeds constitute the precipitate of the religious consciousness of mighty men and times.

Whereas both Protestant and Roman Catholic neology claims that theology is all fluid and in state of flux, orthodoxy insists with James Orr that 'the great landmarks of theology are already fixed'.⁵¹ The early church identified in its creedal formulae the salient features of the faith and left to later generations the task of filling in the theological contours. As formularies that record the central convictions of generations of early Christians, the creeds cannot be taken lightly. Hence theology dares not fly in the face of these sacred instruments. To do so would be to separate oneself from the continuum of historic Christianity.

As reliable instruments of the faith-consciousness of early Christianity, the classical creeds deserve to be more widely utilized by churches in the pietistic tradition, which tend to regard themselves as direct descendants of the apostles. In this way the more separatistic communions would gain a greater appreciation for the unity of Christ's church in its historical continuum.

But the creed is not only a rule; it is also a rule that is ruled. As human formulations the creeds are subordinate to Scripture, the supreme rule of faith and practice. However majestic its language, however moving its assertions, however closely it purports to approximate apostolic doctrine, the

⁵¹ J. Orr, *The Progress of Dogma* (New York, 1902), p. 32.

creed is a human and therefore potentially fallible document. Ultimately the creeds must be checked and ruled by the Word of God. Christendom's creeds are worthy of honour to the degree that they accord with the teachings of the Word of God. As expressed in the Second Helvetic Confession (1566): 'In matters of faith we cannot admit any other judge than God himself, who through His Word tells us what is true and what is false, what is to be followed, and what is to be avoided' (ch. 2). It follows that in matters of doctrinal controversy the ultimate court of appeal is inspired Scripture. In the process of appeal to the Bible the science of hermeneutics is

obviously central to the decision process.

As the church speaks to the modern world through its ancient documents, be they Scripture or creed, it is incumbent on her that she reformulate the timeless message in new and fresh ways. A faith that is living and relevant requires rearticulation in every generation. As Helmut Thielicke has put it, the gospel periodically must be redirected, for modern man is constantly changing his address. Herein lies the mandate for evangelical theology in the future: the creative reformulation and application of the historic Christian message in the contemporary secular world.

Dean Burgon and the Bible: an eminent Victorian and the problem of inspiration

N. M. de S. Cameron

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The year 1860 was one of ferment and controversy for theology. Hard on the heels of *The Origin of Species* (in 1859) came a volume destined to make perhaps a greater impact on British Christianity: *Essays and Reviews*.¹ The title sounded harmless enough (it was one given to several volumes of the period), but the content was explosive. It was a manifesto by Anglican clergymen on behalf of the 'critical' school of biblical scholarship which, though it had been popular on the Continent for a generation, had up till now been looked on as little short of unbelief by the Christian establishment in Britain. The *Essays* themselves were a mixture in length, influence and orthodoxy. Legal proceedings started against two of their writers finally, on appeal to the Privy Council, exonerated them: their view of the Bible was now permissible for Anglicans—a decision of some importance for the development of

British 'critical' scholarship.²

The longest and most devastating chapter was written by Benjamin Jowett, Professor of Greek at Oxford and a New Testament scholar. It was entitled '*On the Interpretation of Scripture*', and, while rightly pointing out some of the ways in which the Bible had been misused by the church, took this as the ground on which to argue that the only proper way to interpret it was to treat it 'like any other book'. The phrase was a refrain repeated throughout the lengthy essay, and taken up by scholars on both sides of the debate during the next forty or so years. Although there is a sense in which it is undeniably true, that was not the sense in which Jowett intended it. He used it as a lever with which to try to upset the entire orthodox doctrine of inspiration. In so doing he raised the

² The word 'critical' is used here, as it tended to be in the debates later nineteenth century, to describe the school of thought which sought to analyse the Pentateuch and other biblical books into their constituent parts, and whose origins were in Germany. At the root of this thinking was a bias against the supernatural in religion which undermined its claims to be 'objective'. In fact 'conservative' scholars generally claimed that *they* were being truly critical, and that the so-called 'Higher Critics' were not.

¹ *Essays and Reviews* (London, 1860).

fundamental issues which we face today, and the immediate response which he elicited from John William Burgon is as relevant now as it was then.

Burgon's sermons on *Inspiration and Interpretation*³ were the first, and in many ways the best, reply to Jowett. C. H. Waller, Principal of the London College of Divinity, looked back on his years at Oxford when 'The *Essays and Reviews* seemed to question the foundations of everything. The majority of orthodox preachers to whom we listened . . . seemed like men recently aroused from a sound slumber by a shower of stones. . . . Only one man in Oxford appeared to understand the exact position, and how to hold his ground. That man was the Reverend John William Burgon, then Fellow of Oriel, and now Dean of Chichester. His "Seven Sermons on Inspiration and Interpretation", preached in 1860-61, will not soon be forgotten by those who heard them.'⁴

The volume remains highly readable, and just as Jowett's essay well states the case for the 'critical' view of Scripture, Burgon lays down the lines of orthodox apologetic that have been followed ever since. For one who spoke in the heat of the freshly-opened debate he saw with remarkable clarity the issues at stake. We shall examine his discussion under three heads.

1. The starting-point

Jowett had argued that the Bible should be interpreted 'like any other book',⁵ and it was at this point of departure that Burgon saw the root of the problem to lie. For Jowett did not mean by that what we might mean:

Approach the volume of Holy Scripture with the same candour, and in the same unprejudiced spirit with which you would approach any other famous book of high antiquity. . . . Acquaint yourself at least as industriously with its method, and with its principle. . . . Be truthful, and unprejudiced, and honest, and consistent, and logical, and exact throughout, in your work of interpretation.⁶

Were that his meaning, Burgon declares, there would be no disagreement. But Jowett 'shows that

his meaning is, Interpret the Bible like any other book, FOR it is like any other book'.⁷ He is not prepared to allow an understanding of the inspiration of Scripture to aid his interpretation of it. On the contrary, he maintains that 'the nature of inspiration can only be known from the examination of Scripture. . . . To the question, "What is inspiration?" the first answer therefore is, "That idea of Scripture which we gather from the knowledge of it".'⁸ That is to say, we must study the Bible with no preconception that it is inspired but rather with 'critical' tools, and seek to define inspiration only when such 'critical' analysis has finished. It is something that 'criticism' will discover for us.

Instead of starting with the assumption that the Bible is 'like any other book', the Christian, writes Burgon, must start with the contrary assumption, for, if the Bible really is inspired, it is for that reason fundamentally *unlike* any other book. The 'critical' approach, in presuming that the Bible may be interpreted essentially by analogy with other literatures, discounts and removes its distinctive features to make it like them. But the Christian who takes inspiration seriously recognizes that:

if it is inspired, it differs from every other book *in kind*; stands among Books as the Incarnate WORD stood among Men—*quite alone*; notwithstanding that He spoke their language, shared their wants, and accommodated Himself to their manners.⁹

Where, then, do we start? Burgon advances two reasons for the inspiration of Scripture as the starting-point for its study. They both derive from the Bible itself—not from our 'critical' analysis of it (expecting to find, and finding, 'errors' at every turn), but from what it states about itself. First, it makes direct claims to be inspired, in such texts as 2 Timothy 3: 16, 'All Scripture is inspired by God (*theopneustos*, "God-breathed")'; indeed, the New Testament writers in a mass of instances make clear the veneration in which they hold the (Old Testament) Scriptures by the way they use them. But, secondly, the supreme example is that of Jesus Christ, who himself handles the Old Testament and regards it as an inspired narrative. Thus,

The Bible is to be interpreted as no other book is, or can be interpreted; and for the plain reason, that the inspired Writers themselves (our LORD Himself at their head!) interpret it after an

³ J. W. Burgon, *Inspiration and Interpretation: seven sermons preached before the University of Oxford . . . being an answer to the volume entitled 'Essays and Reviews' (Oxford and London, 1861).*

⁴ C. H. Waller, *The Authoritative Inspiration of Holy Scripture, as distinct from the inspiration of its human authors, acknowledged by our Lord Jesus Christ* (London, 1887), pp. 7, 8.

⁵ *Essays and Reviews*, p. 377.

⁶ Burgon, *op. cit.*, p. cxli.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. cxlii.

⁸ *Essays and Reviews*, p. 347.

⁹ Burgon, *op. cit.*, p. cl.

altogether extraordinary fashion.¹⁰

Because of the way in which the Bible speaks about itself, we are in no position to criticize or judge it, but must allow it to be our authority and judge us. 'The powers of the mind, as well as the affections of the heart, should be prostrated before the Bible.'¹¹

2. The nature of Scripture

But, the question arises, need that necessarily mean that the Bible is without error? Granted that it is inspired: does it have to be infallible? Burgon laments that, in the writings of many, 'Inspiration, under a miserable attempt to explain it, is openly explained away'.¹²

Yet we do not need to *assume* that inspiration must lead to infallibility. On the one hand, we may observe in detail how the biblical writers use Scripture—the sense that they give to its inspiration. We find that they, and especially the teaching of Jesus Christ in the Gospels, employ the words of the Old Testament without any hesitation, with complete confidence in their veracity. By contrast, any alternative view of the results of inspiration cannot fail to produce difficulties far greater than any faced on the orthodox view. If the Bible is not infallible, if it contains the errors that we find in comparable and purely human books, then where do we stop?

Once admit the principle of fallibility into the inspired Word, and the whole becomes a bruised and rotten reed. If St Paul a little, why not St Paul much? If Moses in some places, why not in many? . . . It might not trouble *you*, to find your own familiar friend telling you a lie, every now and then: but I trust this whole congregation will share the preacher's infirmity, while he confesses that it would trouble *him* so exceedingly that after one established falsehood, he would feel unable ever to trust that friend implicitly again.¹³

What Burgon expresses in this homely manner is in fact a strictly logical point, and one of great force. If the Bible is to have religious authority ('for faith and practice', as we say), then it must have *total* authority. If its authority depends at the end of the day on our agreeing that a statement is authentic and not in error, then the seat of authority has shifted from the Bible to its reader. And, further-

more, if it may be in error in *some* (indeterminate) places, we can never absolutely rely upon it in *any* particular place. For who is to decide the limits of inspiration, or draw the line where inspiration ceases to ensure reliability? Let us hear Burgon once more:

if . . . I am asked whether I believe *the words* of the Bible to be inspired—I answer, To be sure I do—every one of them: and every syllable likewise. Do not *you*?—Where . . . do you, in your wisdom, stop? The *book*, you allow, *is* inspired. How about the chapters? How about the verses? Do you stop at the verses, and not go on to the words? Or perhaps you enjoy a special tradition on this subject, and hold that Inspiration is a general, vague, kind of thing—here more, there less: strong (to speak plainly) where you make no objection to what is stated—weak, where it runs counter to some fancy of your own. . . . 'Here *more*, there *less*,' will not satisfy a parched and weary spirit, athirst for the water of Life, and craving the shadow of the great Rock. What security can *you* offer *me*, that the promise which has sustained me so long occurs in the 'more,' and not in the 'less?' . . . what proof is there that either of us possesses the Word of GOD—the authentic utterance of GOD'S HOLY SPIRIT—at all?¹⁴

These are strong words, and their implication was in Burgon's day and is now much resented by those who take a lower view of the Bible. But no answer to this problem has emerged. For the Scriptures to have religious authority, it must be total and therefore they must be errorless. As the adage has it of a parallel instance, 'If Jesus is not Lord *of all*, He is not Lord *at all*'. Precisely the same may be said of the Bible.

Indeed the parallel between Jesus Christ and the Bible was taken up by Burgon and the conservatives of a century ago as shedding much light on the nature of Scripture. The Bible, as divine and human, may be understood by analogy with the 'two natures' of Christ. It was possible for him to be perfect, sinless, while being fully human: so it is for the Bible to be perfect, without error, and yet a fully human piece of writing. The attempt by some to separate out the divine and human in Scripture (assigning the supposed errors to the 'human' side) was inappropriate in just the same way as any attempt to separate the natures of Christ: they are indivisible. How it is that they are united is a mystery, 'in its way . . . as much beyond our ken, as

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. clxiii. For a recent re-statement of the argument from Jesus' view of the Old Testament, v. J. W. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1972).

¹¹ Burgon, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

the nature of the Union of the Godhead and the Manhood in the one person of CHRIST'.¹⁶

That is Burgon's response to the charge, as false but as frequent then as it is today, that such a conception of inspiration necessarily involves belief in 'mechanical dictation' as its method—an over-riding of the natural faculties of the human authors so as to guarantee the 'dictated' result required. In fact no respected scholar of Burgon's day, or any other day, has held such a theory, and it is not by any means required by an infallible understanding of Scripture. The inspiration of the Bible is but a special case of the doctrine of the providence of God. Burgon exclaims:

I should as soon think of holding a theory of Providence and Freewill, as of holding a theory of Inspiration. I *believe* in Providence. I *know* that I am a free agent. And that is enough for me. The case of Inspiration seems strictly parallel. I *believe* in the Divine origin of the Bible. I *see* that the writers of the several books wrote like men. . . . (*sic*) That outer circle of causation which, leaving each individual will entirely free, so controls without coercing, so overrules without occasioning, the actions of men—that all things shall work together for good in the end, and the great designs of God's Providence find free accomplishment.¹⁶

Nothing less than the full involvement of the natural faculties of the human authors is demanded by belief in an infallible Bible.

3. Dealing with difficulties

Finally, we may glance at the implications Burgon's view of the nature of Scripture carries for problems which arise in the course of biblical interpretation. Conservative believers are often taunted with this or that 'difficulty' arising from the text of Scripture which, it is alleged, will undermine their doctrine of biblical infallibility. Burgon touches on two kinds of problem—historical and moral—and demonstrates that, if approached properly, they need present no obstacle to the man who upholds the orthodox attitude to the Bible. On the contrary, his very method and line of approach take 'difficulties' in their stride.

First, as an example of a moral problem, Burgon discusses the story in Judges 5 of the killing of Sisera by Jael. He points out that this is a key narrative, as some of its features particularly outraged mid-Victorian morality: 'I have heard

stronger things said against her (*sc.* Jael), than against any of the Worthies of old time, who are mentioned with distinct approbation in the Book of Life.'¹⁷ Such narratives should be approached mindful that we have only an incomplete account before us, often but the briefest summary of complex historical circumstances. Were full information available, there would be no difficulty. As it is, 'Scripture is severely brief: takes no pains to conciliate our good opinion: seems to care nothing either for our applause or our censure.'¹⁸

From this evident fact Burgon draws a principle—that Scripture is 'an instrument of man's probation'; that is to say, our response to it is a test of our faith and an opportunity to deepen it, as all is not made plain and we must interpret it with trust.

As regards this particular account, the approach taken is crucial: if you choose to consider Jael as one who lured a weary and unsuspecting soldier into her tent—shewed him hospitality—and when he was asleep, murdered him in cold blood—you certainly cannot help recoiling from the inspired decision that, 'Blessed above women shall Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite be'. But I take the liberty of saying that this is quite the wrong way to read her story. *You must begin it from the other end.*¹⁹

This last and apparently unimportant sentence is actually the key to Burgon's approach to 'problem passages', moral and historical. Instead of starting with the 'problem' and, because it appears to require it, abandoning the doctrine of Scripture in the light of it, he starts with his prior belief about Scripture (that it is inspired and therefore infallible), and examines the 'problem' in the light of that belief. So he begins with the divine commendation of Jael:

GOD pronounces this woman blessed, and distinctly commends her for her deed. From this point you must start; remembering that no action CAN be immoral which GOD praises. The Divine sentence, instead of creating a difficulty, is, on the contrary, exactly the thing which removes it. To weigh the story apart from this (which is the prime consideration of all) is like condemning the immorality of an executioner without caring to hear that he is but carrying out the sentence of the Lawgiver.²⁰

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 222-223.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 223. Our emphasis.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 223-234.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

an ecumenical Roman Catholic, not as a Catholic Barthian.⁵

Radical rejection of infallibility

In view of Küng's soteriology, one must ask how Küng can sidestep the historical pronouncements of the popes and the creeds of the councils. This question introduces Küng's second contribution: religious authority.

The controversy over *Humanae Vitae* which barred artificial birth control provided the occasion but not the provocation, for Küng to publish *Infallible? An Inquiry*.⁶ Councils, he wrote, are not infallible, but are imperfect and contradictory. The creeds, formed in the fire of controversy, are fragmentary, incomplete, and imperfect. They carry error with the truth. By the application of historical criticism to dogmatic formulation, Küng comes to the conclusion that creeds are not rigid or frozen formulations, but rather 'living signposts'. Else he said:

Definitions and decrees are simply not intended to say everything there is to say about the truth. They are not intended as balanced, detached, learned treatises, but as correction to particular definite errors.⁷

If the traditional formulations and councils are fallible, where then does one look for authority? 'To the papacy' would be a natural suggestion as the ultimate appeal for authority, but Küng sees fallibility there also. Vatican I must be understood in terms of the controversy of that time, says Küng. Popes are not the citadel of truth for they have erred and the 'Pope cannot by any means define arbitrarily or against the will of the Church as a whole; the Pope himself has to be on his guard against schism'.⁸ Küng has called on the pope to admit his fallibility in order to satisfy academic inquiry, silence Protestant criticism, and advance ecumenical life. For Küng, papal infallibility is a political tool—an instrument of power, rather than a theological reality—an instrument of truth.⁹

As a leading force for biblical dogmatics in the Catholic Church, Küng turns to Scripture for

direction. He constantly calls for a return to Scripture, filling his books with scriptural citations. 'For Küng, the normative language of faith must always be scripture.'¹⁰ But Küng's view of inspiration is not what it may appear. He doubts many of the New Testament passages, but still finds value in them. The Scripture, he says, contains a mass of contradictory doctrines, some of which are false.

If Christians do not have an infallible tradition, nor an infallible pope, nor an infallible Bible, what assurance can they have? Küng answers that they have the church with the promise of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. Hans Küng believes in the church's 'indeceivability' (*Untrüglichkeit*). He has confidence that the Spirit will guide the corporate church along the path of truth, but it will not have the luxury of infallible signs along the way. This *Untrüglichkeit* guarantees stability and unshatterability; 'in brief, a fundamental remaining in the truth in spite of all ever possible error'.¹¹

The essence of the problem is linguistic, for Küng, because any claim to infallibility is dependent on propositions. Although Küng is not against definitive statements per se, for he recognizes them in Scripture, he does object to identifying those propositional definitions as truth. He reminds his readers that language is always fluid and subject to change. Additionally, language is not capable of explaining divine realities.

For Küng, God alone is infallible.¹² The word 'infallible' should not be used of anyone else (pope) nor anything else (Bible). Religious certainty comes from an encounter with Christ. Wells interprets Küng as 'asking the Church to believe that every time Christ is preached from the defective biblical documents, a miracle occurs so that a genuine rather than a defective Christ emerges to confront the hearer'.¹³

Although Küng's conclusions have a familiar overtone of Protestant neo-orthodoxy, the methodology fits nicely into the Roman system—the simplified Catholic position of tradition and Scripture interpreted by the church. The church, of course, is seen as an extension of Christ's incarnation which is guided by Christ's Spirit so that the church can unroll the scroll of truth.

If Küng had been a Protestant, his attack on papal infallibility would have passed without notice, yet the goal of the theologian from Tübingen was clearly to destroy this stubborn obstacle to reunion.

⁵ J. J. Carey, 'Hans Küng and Karl Barth: One Flesh and One Spirit', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* X (winter 1971), p. 6.

⁶ Hans Küng, *Infallible? An Inquiry* (NY: Image Books, Doubleday, 1972).

⁷ Hans Küng, *Council, Reform and Reunion* (NY: Sheed & Ward, 1961), pp. 113-114.

⁸ Küng as quoted by David F. Wells, *Revolution in Rome* (Downer's Grove, Ill. and London: IVP, 1972), p. 109.

⁹ C. Stevens, 'Infallibility and History', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* X (Spring 1973), p. 387.

¹⁰ Carey, 'Infallibility', p. 434.

¹¹ Küng, *Infallible?*, p. 167.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Wells, p. 113.

And the Vatican was watching.

In 1975, after six years of inquiry, the Vatican's high tribunal, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, admonished Küng. Their action was a surprise, because it was so mild. He was not even asked to renounce his 'mistaken views'.¹⁴ But Küng's reply to the Vatican was less mild, 'I shall not let myself be prevented from further performing my theological service to mankind in an ecumenical spirit, nor from continuing to teach what can be defended from the New Testament and from the great Christian tradition as Catholic doctrine'.¹⁵

Radical ecumenism

The third key is Küng's concept of ecumenism to which his study of justification and infallibility were preliminary. In *Justification* Küng showed that, if not identity, there is at least 'a considerable proximation' between Roman and Protestant theologies.¹⁶ Theology need not any longer be a barrier to re-union. Küng notes also a similarity in Catholic and Protestant spirituality.¹⁷ The one remaining barrier is organizational. The path to overcome this obstacle is 'renewal'.¹⁸

For Küng, the 'great stone of stumbling' on the way to unity is the papacy or, using his preferred term, 'the petrine office'. The modern reality in Rome simply does not reflect the New Testament image of the shepherd. The pope must not be the master, but the servant of all. 'One thing is certain,' he writes, 'to overcome the church's schism, sacrifices will be required from all participants, none of whom are without guilt, including the papal office'.¹⁹ And as apostolic succession is a central buttress of papal authority, Küng writes:

Ultimately we may come to see that the idea of apostolic succession expresses what is common to the various Churches rather than what divides them: the succession, not only of the apostles, but

¹⁴ Trevor Beeson, 'Hans Küng', *Christian Century* XCII (14 May 1975), p. 498 and 'Admonished', *Christianity Today* XIX (14 Mar. 1975), p. 57.

¹⁵ Küng as cited by Beeson, p. 479.

¹⁶ Küng, *Council, Reform and Reunion*, p. 116.

¹⁷ Paul M. Minus, Jr. *The Catholic Rediscovery of Protestantism* (NY: Paulist Press, 1976), pp. 135f. Ehrlich quotes, 'es sind auch Christen, die an denselben Christus und sein Evangelium glauben wollen' to illustrate that it is not the same faith which is credited to Protestants, but only the same will (endeavour, desire, wish) to believe. R. J. Ehrlich, 'Protestant-Roman Catholic Encounter', *Scottish Journal of Theology* XVI (Mar. 1963), pp. 23f.

¹⁸ Küng, *Council, Reform and Reunion*, p. 128ff.

¹⁹ Hans Küng (ed.), *Apostolic Succession: Rethinking A Barrier to Unity* (NY: Paulist Press, 1968), pp. 28-33. Note the significance of the subtitle. Although the quote comes from Küng's own essay, the other contributions in the book show that Küng is not alone in his method of rethinking.

also of the prophets and the teachers, and finally, of all the charismatic functions as the full expression of the will of all the Churches to remain true to the Gospel and to let the apostolic message be expressed anew every day. Then orderly apostolic succession will express the will of all the Churches to live by the message of the apostles and their Lord, not as an anarchical, self-opinionated, autonomous and merely incidental agglomeration of different people, but as the orderly, obedient, faithful and serving community of Jesus Christ. The manner in which this is worked out will show how faithful every Church is to the Gospel. This is bound to have its effect on the brotherhood of the individual Churches. All the Churches have to face this eminently critical issue of how to be apostolic through succession.²⁰

For Küng, there is a right way and a wrong way to reunion. It is wrong, he says, for one side to surrender, or for one side to gain by individual conversions. The only right way is for both sides to change through renewal.²¹

He says the Catholic Church is 'too encrusted with the vestigial forms of earlier ages to allow her to be fully effective today. Her thought, organizational structure, discipline, liturgy, and piety need to be reformed and renewed according to the gospel'.²² Such renewal must not be simply bartering, but it must spring from the very life of the church, yet at the same time it will fulfil the demands of Protestants.²³

Conclusions

With these three keys to unlock the treasure of Küng's thought, it is possible to suggest an evaluation of his latest major literary contribution, *On Being a Christian*. If *Justification* landed on the 'playground' of theologians, *On Being a Christian* exploded in the centre of Christianopolis. It reopened the basic questions: 'Who is Jesus Christ?' and 'What does it mean to be a Christian in modern life?' The first section of the book, 'The Horizon', silhouettes Christianity against the landscape of world religions and modern secular thought. Then, in 'The Distinction' Küng says that the uniqueness of Christianity is simply Christ. 'The whole of Christianity,' he writes, 'is left hanging in mid-air if it is detached from the foundation on which it is

²⁰ Küng, *Apostolic Succession*, p. 2.

²¹ Hans Küng, 'What Christians expect of Vatican II', *Christianity and Crisis* XXIII (16 Sep. 1963), pp. 156-57.

²² Küng as quoted by Minus, p. 186.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

Burgon then sketches in the background: the Kenites as the allies and friends of the children of Israel, the promise of deliverance by God, the raising up of Deborah to organize resistance against Jabin, and her prophecy that God would deliver Sisera into the hand of a woman. Seen in that context,

it was *not* because she was treacherous, or because she was cruel! . . . most assuredly, had she been either, she would not—she *could* not, have won praise from GOD! . . . O no! It was because she beheld in the slumbering captain at once the enemy of her own afflicted race—and of GOD's oppressed people—and above all of GOD Himself.²¹

I believe that, instead of suspecting the morality of the Bible in this instance, there is hardly an honest Christian heart among us, but cries out, on the contrary—'So let *all* Thine enemies perish, O LORD! But let them that love Him be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might.'²²

Secondly, we turn to an example of how Burgon deals with historical difficulties. Here we find that he employs the same method, arguing not from the problem to the doctrine of Scripture, but *vice versa*. Every biblical statement must be treated 'in exactly the same spirit with which you approach the statement of any man of honour of your acquaintance'.²³ That is, the Christian does not jump to the conclusion that there is an error. He allows a presumption of innocence, and endeavours to harmonize and reconcile.

Now, these principles are fully admitted in daily life. If your friend comes to you with ever so improbable a tale, the last thing which enters into your mind is to disbelieve him. Is he in earnest? Yes, on his honour. Is he sure he is not mistaken? *That* very doubt of yours requires an apology: but your friend says—'I am as sure as I am of my existence'. . . 'It must be so then,' you exclaim, 'though I *cannot* understand it.'

He continues:

You are requested to observe—for really you *must* admit—that *any* possible solution of a difficulty, however *improbable* it may seem, any *possible* explanation of the story of a competent

witness, is enough logically and morally to exempt a man from the imputation of an incorrect statement.²⁴

To illustrate his point, Burgon tells of a court case in Australia that turns on a question of time. Three witnesses each say that they have seen a certain man outside each of three different Oxford churches when they heard the clock strike one. The judge is compelled to conclude that, while the men's testimony is generally reliable, it is not quite accurate: 'Whereas you and I know perfectly that the three clocks in question were, till lately, *kept five minutes apart*.'²⁵

Our ignorance of the detailed circumstances of the biblical history must ever be borne in mind as we face difficulties in the text, and when set in the context of our confidence in Scripture (which rests on other grounds) places alleged 'difficulties' in perspective. This is a methodological principle, implicit in many conservative scholars but carefully explicated here by Burgon, moving from the doctrine of inspiration to the interpretation of the text and problems it contains. It stands as a counterpoise to the method of the 'critics', who built their reconstructions around such 'problems' and sought to define inspiration only in terms of their results. By contrast, the conservative method, rooted in the Bible's own understanding of itself and the church's historic doctrine, seeks to make adequate sense of the phenomena of the text as they stand. This high view of the Bible is not open to the self-contradiction of rival views of its authority. On the contrary, it is consistent and well able, systematically, to cope with objections and difficulties raised in its path.

In conclusion, let us hear the famous conclusion of Burgon's sermon on 2 Timothy 3: 16:

THE BIBLE is none other than *the voice of Him that sitteth upon the Throne!* Every Book of it—every Chapter of it—every verse of it—every word of it—every syllable of it . . . is the direct utterance of the Most High! *Pasa graphē Theopneustos*. Well spake the HOLY GHOST, by the mouth of the many blessed Men who wrote it. The Bible is none other than *the Word of GOD*: not some part of it, more, some part of it, less: but all alike, the utterance of Him who sitteth upon the Throne—absolute—faultless—unerring—supreme!²⁶

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 230.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

Hans Küng: architect of radical Catholicism

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Is it possible for a Roman Catholic theologian to believe in justification by faith alone, oppose papal infallibility, reject apostolic succession, and even question the deity of Jesus Christ? Yes, it is. Hans Küng, perhaps the best known living Catholic theologian, does exactly those things. How is it possible for Küng to do it?

One clue to achieving an understanding of Küng, the Swiss-born professor at the University of Tübingen, is recognizing his ability to make himself heard. His readability scores are so attractive that they provoke the ultimate curse among scientific theologians: 'He is a popularizer.' But Küng does have the ability to write so that he is understood by the theologians and the laymen—and he writes prolifically. Küng's working and writing are not yet finished, however, so any evaluation of his contribution is difficult and tentative.

Ignoring the example of the prudence of angels, I will rush in with three keys which I believe will unlock the essence of Küng's contribution to contemporary theology. These three keys are: a radical biblical dogmatic, a radical rejection of infallibility, and a radical ecumenism.

Radical biblical theology

Karl Barth's work on Romans has often been likened to a bombshell and he would be pleased that his fellow-theologian, Küng, dropped a similar bomb upon the 'playground' of Catholic theologians. Küng's 'bomb' was, ironically, *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection*. The controversy created by this book centred on two things—Küng's remarks about Barth and Barth's remarks about Küng.

The two theologians have much in common. Küng shares Barth's dual concerns for 'the word of God' and 'christocentric concentration'. The two stress man's wretched sinfulness and understand that God must act first in justification. Both deny man any claim to a subordinate or effective contribution in salvation and see a very personalistic atonement. Both reject human 'merit' or works. Both see redeemed man as *simul justus et peccator*, a state achieved by *sola fide* and *solī deo gloria*. To

add to the amazement of the theological world, Küng's *Justification* carried the *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur*!

As if these conclusions of Küng did not produce enough surprises, the book contained, as a foreword, a letter from Karl Barth. In that letter, Barth stated: (1) 'Your readers may rest assured . . . that you have me say what I actually do say and that I mean it the way you have me say it', (2) that if Küng really expresses Catholic thought, then he, Barth, agrees with Catholic theology, and (3) that he, Barth, doubts that the Canons of the Council of Trent express, in fact, what Küng finds in them.¹

The theological world was stunned. William Visser t'Hooft, longtime General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, said that if these ideas are widely accepted in the Catholic Church, 'protestantism will no longer have any important reason for its protest'.²

Like the observers at the day of Pentecost, modern man asked, 'What meaneth this?' Some theologians wondered if Küng's views were really tenable with Catholic dogmatic. Bernard Ramm observed that Küng 'has moved to protestant ground and doesn't know it'. Barth had mused about the necessity of another pilgrimage to Trent, but Ramm continues that 'the real traveller is Küng and the destination is Luther's study in the Augustinian house of Wittenberg'.³ But Montgomery warned that 'before evangelicals become too enthusiastic over Küng's efforts', they must realize that neo-orthodoxy does not represent orthodox reformation theology.⁴

Barth and Küng see Scripture as central, yet they view it critically. And in spite of a common starting-point, the two have very different motivations. Küng's concern for the authority of the church (which must not be mistaken for the structures of hierarchy) and for renewal separate him from Barth. Hans Küng is best understood as

¹ Hans Küng, *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection* (NY: Nelson, 1964) with Barth's 'A Letter to the Author,' pp. xixff.

² J. J. Carey, 'Infallibility Revisited', *Theology Today* XXVII (Jan. 1972), pp. 237-238.

³ Bernard Ramm, 'Justification: Barth and Küng', *Eternity* XVI (winter, 1971), p. 42.

⁴ John Warwick Montgomery, *Ecumenicity, Evangelicals, and Rome* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1959), pp. 103-104.

built: this Christ'.²⁴ The third part, 'The Programme,' considers God, man, faith, and community. It is possible for Küng to elaborate upon each of these, although Scripture narratives like the nativity story of virgin birth are merely 'a collection of largely uncertain, mutually contradictory, strongly legendary and ultimately theological motivated narratives, with a character of their own'.²⁵ A final section of the book, 'Practice', finally arrives at the suggestion that because the supernaturalism of God can no longer be brought to modern man, the humanness of man must be brought to God. To be a Christian means to be radically human. The human is raised or transfigured into a better humanity.

Rejecting the infallibility of Chalcedon and the other creeds which define Christology 'from above',

²⁴ Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian* (London: Collins, 1977) p. 124.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 451.

Küng prefers to formulate a 'theology' of Christ from below. Christ, so often mentioned in the past rather than the present tense, receives stress as the model for Christians to follow.²⁶ The possibility that Christ is in the present and that he has fellowship with his followers never is offered as a possibility. This perhaps is the greatest weakness of Küng's theological journey. The Christian pilgrim crossing the desert of modern values must have an oasis.

Regardless of how much one admires Küng's erudition and productivity or how one identifies with his struggle for honesty about Scripture, infallibility, and ecumenics, he leaves much unanswered. If so much of Christianity can be stripped away, what does Küng really offer as the church's *Untrüglichkeit*? Then, considering not the believer, but the unbeliever, will such a secularized gospel have any appeal to secular man strangling on his secularity?

²⁶ *Ibid.*, *passim*.