

**PRACTICAL THEOLOGY: A
NEGLECTED
FIELD IN THEOLOGICAL
EDUCATION, PP. 69-87**

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GERALD BIRNEY SMITH

It is the purpose of this article to call attention to certain significant results of the introduction of scientific and historical methods into modern theological study. The specific question to be asked and answered is whether the divinity school which adopts the scientific method is performing its duty to the church for which it professes to train ministers. If it is not, what solution of the problem is compatible with the integrity of scientific spirit in the curriculum?

I

It is impossible to ignore the fact that a certain lack of sympathy, amounting sometimes to distrust and even hostility, exists between modern theological scholarship and the evangelical interests of the church. The scholar feels that no greater disaster could befall Christianity than to continue to proclaim doctrines which cannot be scientifically defended. He therefore is impatient at the indifference or hostility with which his critical investigations are greeted by the church. The preacher, on the other hand, knows that skepticism is fatal to faith. He therefore deplores even the honest questionings of the scholar, because they introduce a negative tone where he desires positive conviction. In Germany, where theology is professedly a university subject, and where consequently the scientific interests have been especially emphasized, the tension between church and theological science is keenly felt. A considerable literature dealing with this condition of affairs has appeared, and the subject is engaging the attention of some of the leading minds.¹ In America the problem involved has not yet received adequate scientific treatment; but it is keenly felt by both churches and theological seminaries, and occasions much unfortunate friction. The prevalent uneasiness shows itself in various ways. Now it is the trial of a theological professor for heresy; now it is his forced resignation; more frequently it takes the form of diatribes against "higher criticism." The one constant factor in the various disturbances is a failure to define clearly just what the function

¹Among the most significant contributions may be mentioned the following: BOSEMANN, *Die Unzulänglichkeit des theologischen Studiums der Gegenwart*, 1886; DÜRM, *Ueber Ziel und Methode der theologischen Wissenschaft*, 1889; GOTTSCHICK, *Theologische Wissenschaft und Pfarramt*, 1895; BEINOUILLI, *Die wissenschaftliche und die kirchliche Methode in der Theologie*, 1897; REISCHLE, "Kirchliche Lehre und theologische Wissenschaft," *Theologische Rundschau*, December, 1898; IDEM, "Kirchliche und unkirchliche Theologie," *Deutsch-evangelische Blätter*,

July, 1900; ROLFFS, "Die theologische Wissenschaft," *Hefte zur Christlichen Welt*, No. 38; DEISSMANN, "Theologie und Kirche," *ibid.*, No. 47; TRÖLTSCHE, *Die wissenschaftliche Lage und ihre Anforderungen an die Theologie*, 1900; HAENACK, *Die Aufgabe der theologischen Facultäten und die allgemeine Religionsgeschichte*, 1901; REISCHLE, "Historische und dogmatische Theologie," *Theologische Rundschau*, July and August, 1901; TRAUB, "Kirchliche und unkirchliche Theologie," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 1903, 1 Heft.

of a divinity school is. It is assumed by both parties in the controversy that a theological professor is to teach the truth. But the fact is overlooked that scientific truth and spiritual truth are so different in their psychological aspects that the teaching of the one does not necessarily involve the teaching of the other. A brief consideration of this aspect of the problem must precede our main inquiry.

It is a fundamental principle of scientific method that any hypothesis or conclusion is always subject to re-examination and revision, if the facts warrant it. The historical method of dealing with the sources and official expressions of Christian belief must constantly encourage questioning. It must often begin by demolishing the dogmatic and untested theories with which a student enters the divinity school. It insists that judgments are to be formed slowly, and only after long and careful study. It demands that many questions—some of them seemingly fundamental—shall be left undecided until further information is possible. Of course, when conclusions are reached by this method, they rest upon a secure basis. But even in those instances where the facts seem to have been entirely gathered in, there is the possibility that further research may modify or overthrow present conclusions. The student trained under the historical method forms the habit of making provisional judgments.

Now, however admirable this judicial frame of mind may be for the scholar, it has certain serious defects for the man of action. Macaulay once said that no army ever prospered under the direction of a debating society. The historical method in theological study seems to the man of action to be equivalent to transforming the ministry into a debating society. What he desires is a definite plan for a campaign—a positive message for men. The prophet speaks with a "Thus saith the Lord." The scholar says: "So far as I have examined the matter, the indications are that a conclusion is to be reached in this direction." The prophet appeals to mankind, and enlists men to action. The scholar speaks to a small circle of *savants*. The man of action is impatient with the slow-working processes of the critic; for as long as judgment is suspended, so long is action deferred. So far as practical results are concerned, there is little difference between the fundamental agnosticism of the avowed infidel and the judicial doubt of the critical scholar. In either case an inhibition is introduced into men's thinking which defeats vigorous action, and inactivity means the death of practical spiritual life. The painstaking scholar naturally objects to being classed with the infidel. But such a classification is very natural when the influence of the two men is judged on purely practical grounds. If the divinity of Christ, for example, be doubted, it makes little difference to the man to whom a belief in the divinity of Christ is of supreme practical importance, whether the doubt be due to a radical hostility to the teachings of the church, or to a critical study of the sources of the life of Christ. To the man of action the essential thing is positive conviction. Anything which interferes with such positive conviction he condemns as "destructive" and "agnostic."

Thus a habit of mind which may be altogether admirable from the scientific point

of view may be entirely inadequate from the practical standpoint. The scholar is quick to appreciate the fact that a man who is pre-eminently adapted for practical work may be incapable of treating history in a scientific spirit. The opposite truth, that scientific habits may be a hindrance to practical usefulness, is not so readily admitted.

We may illustrate our point by two quotations, one from the scholar's standpoint, the other from a man who is interested in practical religious results. Professor E. D. Burton thus describes the scholar's task:²

The goal of biblical interpretation thus conceived of is reached when the interpreter has found the thought of the author, of Isaiah, *e. g.*, or of Paul. With the truth of that thought, *i. e.*, with its correspondence to reality, the interpreter, in the sense in which we are now using the term, has nothing to do. Interpretation is true, not when it reaches the truth, but when it reaches the real thought expressed in that which is to be interpreted.

Nothing could be more admirable than just this attitude of mind, if one is interested in historical method. But how will it appeal to the man who is interested in practical results? He will say that so long as the question of the truth or falsity of the message of Isaiah is left in doubt, he is prohibited from employing that message as an authoritative source of religious teaching. Yet the scholar rightly replies that only by such an examination as that above outlined are we in a position to answer the further question as to the practical value of the writing in question. Until we know what the Bible actually teaches, we are unable to use it with any kind of accuracy. Yet during this period of critical study the practical worker is left in a most uncomfortable attitude of suspended judgment. The negative quality of such an attitude is forcibly expressed in the following words of a well-known writer:³

It is painfully evident that the recent attempts to meet the long-felt difficulties in the Old Testament, historic and other, by minimizing the knowledge of God possessed by Israel, have tended rather to undermine the faith of Christians than to confirm it. And the reason of this is evident. As the distinction between the Jews and other peoples is effaced, and both are put under the law of historic development, the distinction between the Bible and other sacred books is effaced. . . . In reading the more advanced critics it is very noticeable what a small active part is ascribed to Jehovah in His relations to Israel. It is not His dealings with His people of which we are told, but of the progressive development of their ideas of Him.⁴

The author of this book feels that Christianity rests upon the self-revelation of God. He wishes to use the Bible as the authoritative word of God to men. But critical scholarship does not ask what message God has *for me* in the book of Isaiah, *e. g.*, but what Isaiah believed concerning God's dealings with men. More than this. It may proceed in the light of archaeological discoveries to declare that Isaiah was mistaken in certain particulars. Much as the scholar may desire to arrive at positive conclusions, his method of reaching these must inevitably be a hindrance rather than

²"The Function of Interpretation in Theology," *American Journal of Theology*, Vol. II (1898), p. 58.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. vii.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 387.

³SAMUEL J. ANDREWS, *God's Revelations of Himself to Men*, 2d ed., 1902.

a help to the man who needs some definite working-theory for his practical labor. It is in vain that the scholar points out the splendid results of the historical method: the re-discovery of biblical personalities, the disentanglement of history from legend, the interpretation of the message of the biblical writers against the historic background of their times, the ascertaining of the real teaching of difficult and obscure writings, the discovery of literary forms as aids in interpretation. All these achievements of scholarship are rehearsed with pathetic patience. But more important to the practical worker than all these gains is the loss which he sees in the substitution of intellectual curiosity for spiritual authority in the mind of the Bible student. After reading a treatise in which the errors of traditional interpretations are demonstrated, he is apt to ask if, after all, the Protestant church has been emancipated from the priesthood of the Roman Catholic church, only to become utterly dependent on a new priesthood of critical scholars for its knowledge of Christian truth. For practical purposes the Catholic priesthood is preferable, because it has authoritative teachings ready for use, while the scholars are "ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth." The waiting attitude, the suspension of judgment, the willingness to entertain either of two conflicting theories—all of these are conditions of life for science; but they are conditions of death for active faith.⁴

Now, both the scientific and the practical interests must be conserved by a complete theological education. This is universally admitted. The point to which attention is especially directed in what follows is the fact that the two interests are so diverse in kind that elaborate provision for the scientific ends does not necessarily involve adequate preparation for practical ends. I have purposely emphasized the practical point of view in order to make this clear. If we can once differentiate these two points of view, and define the proper demands of each, we shall do much toward a better understanding between the scholar and the Christian worker,⁵ and it may be that we shall find that even the scientific task of the accurate formulation of Christian truth is incomplete until it shall produce a practical as well as a historical theology.

II

The Roman Catholic church knows no tension between the scientific and the practical ends of theological study, for the reason that the entire curriculum is expected to yield practical results. The classic formulation of the Catholic ideal was given by Thomas Aquinas, when he asserted that the real end of sacred doctrine is not knowledge for its own sake, but knowledge which shall lead men to eternal blessedness.⁶

⁴ Professor Burton recognizes this fact when he says: "The Christian world cannot do without a theology while it waits for the several contributory sciences to complete their quota of material with which theology is to work."—*Loc. cit.*, p. 71.

⁵ "Diese Verflechtung der Theologie mit dem praktischen Leben ist sogar eine Hauptsache der Unklarheit darüber, was die theologische Wissenschaft thun soll und wie sie es thun soll."—DIEHM, *Ueber Ziel und Methode der theologischen Wissenschaft*, p. 3.

⁶ *Summa Theologica*, Qu. I, Art. 4: "Unde licet in scientiis philosophicis alia sit speculativa, et alia practica, sacra tamen doctrina comprehendit sub se utramque. . . . Magis tamen est speculativa quam practica: quia principalius agit de rebus divinis quam de actibus humanis; de quibus agit secusquam quot per eos ordinatur homo ad perfectam Dei cognitionem, in qua aeterna beatitudo consistit."

Any speculations concerning God offered by philosophy must be supplemented by the teachings of revelation, because only revelation can give the knowledge necessary to salvation.⁹

According to this ideal, all theological study is devoted to the practical end of establishing faith. For example, the Scriptures are to be studied, not merely to ascertain the historical meaning, but more especially to yield spiritual truth. This is the significance of the query raised as to whether figurative interpretations of Scripture are allowable.¹⁰ Of the four kinds of exegesis mentioned, three have a distinctively practical end. The allegorical sense enables one to read a Christian content into the Old Testament. The moral sense yields practical direction for one's ordinary Christian life. The anagogical sense satisfies one's supramundane aspirations. Thus, according to Thomas, the chief end of the study of Scripture was to formulate the doctrines of faith so as to serve the practical needs of the church.

The same ideal prevailed also in the study of historical theology. Tradition as well as Scripture was to be studied for the practical purpose of ascertaining those truths which are indispensable to a saving knowledge of God. Thus, when the universities arose, the theological faculties were expected merely to expound the Scriptures and some approved *summa* of traditional doctrines.¹¹ The scientific and the practical ideals were not felt to be different. The courses given would be technically classified as speculative or scientific; but actually they were practical in their nature. Thus no need was felt for a specific department of practical theology.

With the enlargement of the curriculum in Catholic schools of theology there has been no change of ideal. The knowledge gained from Scripture and from history is regarded as a direct means of promoting religious life. This prominence of the practical ideal effectually prevents any thoroughgoing adoption of historical method and genuine scientific attitude in Catholic instruction. No science for its own sake is desired. All study must promote the faith and life of the church. In a sense all the departments devote themselves to practical rather than to scientific theology.¹² In most seminaries courses in pastoral theology and in homiletics are given. But the former would better be named ecclesiastics, while the latter presupposes a practical grasp of material for preaching as the contribution of the other departments. There is thus no problem as to the relation of scientific to practical interests in the Catholic church.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Qu. I, Art. 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Qu. I, Arts. 9, 10.

¹¹ SCHMIDT, *Geschichte der Pädagogik*, Vol. II, p. 363.

¹² A common practice in Catholic seminaries is to divide the curriculum into four groups: biblical theology, dogmatic theology, moral theology, and historical theology. Moral theology includes courses in canon law and in liturgics, hence has a partially practical character. The significant feature of this fourfold division, however, is the entire lack of any specifically practical department. See, e. g., the catalogue of the Catholic University of America, and of St. Louis University.

The following statement in the catalogue of St. Mary's Seminary, Baltimore, illustrates the Catholic ideal: "Both the speculative and the practical questions bearing upon the matter are dealt with. Thus the practical questions are studied in connection with their dogmatic foundations, and the meaning and bearing of dogmatic truth is better grasped by seeing its practical application. Special stress is laid on . . . the application of general principles to the particular circumstances existing in this country. Throughout the whole course students receive suggestions on the manner of preaching nowadays on these various topics."