

Biblical Criticism and Church Worship

The Presidential Address to the Church Service Society at its Annual Meeting, at New College, Edinburgh, 21st May, 1954.

WHEN you did me the honour of inviting me to be President of this Society, a Society which aims at maintaining and developing our standards of Christian worship, I could not help contrasting myself with most of those who have held this honourable office before me. As a rule they have been men who spent the greater part, if not indeed the whole, of a long ministry in a pastoral charge, where they had the exacting task of leading the prayers and the praises of a Christian congregation and of establishing their people in Christian faith and Christian life. I on the other hand have spent almost the whole of my ministry in a Chair of Biblical Criticism; I have been shut up with a little band of students, examining with them the documents which make up our New Testament. And I have accordingly had to ask myself how far the aims which I have had before me as a teacher, and that other aim with which I am now identified as President of this Society, may be reconciled, and indeed made to supplement one another.

In one respect there is a marked difference in approach between the Biblical Criticism of to-day (I am thinking more particularly of New Testament Criticism) and the type of criticism which was dominant at an earlier period. Those earlier critics whom I have in mind tended to regard their task as primarily a literary one; the New Testament was for them a collection of literary documents, and they sought to determine who wrote them, to what date they are to be assigned, and what literary sources go to their composition. The critic of to-day, on the other hand, cannot think of isolating these documents from the religious society whose faith and worship are enshrined in them. If we are to read the New Testament aright our ears must be attuned to hear, above and beyond the words of any individual writer, echoes of the early Christian Church as it gives confident expression to the faith that unites it, and lifts up its soul to God in adoration, thanksgiving and prayer.

Such an approach is now recognized to be necessary even in our study of the Synoptic Gospels. "Form-Criticism"

as applied to the Gospels raises the question how far the very "form" in which any particular story of Jesus has come down to us has been moulded in accordance with the use which the early Christian communities may have made of it as they faced their twofold task of building up the life of their own members and proclaiming the faith to others. But it is of course in the other books of the New Testament that we may expect to find the clearest indications of liturgical, confessional, and catechetical developments in the early Church. Such developments not unnaturally followed lines which were already familiar in Judaism.

A living Church is generally a singing Church; and from the first the Christian Church expressed its faith in song. It ought not to surprise us that the Apocalypse of St. John (which has been called "the most liturgical book in the New Testament") is punctuated throughout by triumphal outbursts of praise. These are not irrelevant interruptions of the visions which compose the body of the book; they are an integral part of the "revelation" which God has granted to his servant with the commission that he should communicate it to others. Some of these songs follow a familiar Jewish model; others fall into the category of "new" songs—they are songs of redemption; and they are all aglow, as indeed the whole Apocalypse is aglow, with the adoring confession of the Sovereignty of God, and of the Lordship of Christ crucified and risen, through whom the Almighty has assumed the great power that is his by right and has begun his reign (xi. 15ff). We may reasonably infer that songs such as these were actually sung in Christian worship, when "saints on earth" assembled to lift up hearts and voices in harmony with the choirs of heaven. And there is one of those songs (from chapter v) in which we to-day still join when we sing what in Scotland we know as the 65th Scripture Paraphrase: "Hark how the adoring hosts above with songs surround the throne".

Passing to the Epistles of the New Testament, we may reflect how St. Paul in his youth must have learned to appreciate the sublimity and richness of the Jewish liturgy; and it is with the added conviction of Christian experience that in two of his Letters he emphasizes the helpful part which "psalms, hymns and songs" can play in building up the Christian life (Col. iii. 16; Eph. v. 19). In Eph. v. 14 he quotes three lines from an otherwise unknown source; and from the appeal which is made to the saving power of Christ, and the implied contrast between sleep and waking,

darkness and light, death and resurrection we are probably justified in thinking that we have here a verse from a baptismal hymn. In I Tim. iii. 16 we have an early Christian confession, expressed in poetical form and obviously meant to be sung; and the "faithful saying" of II Tim. ii. 11-13, beginning with the words: "If we have died with him we shall also live with him", would again seem to be from a hymn which might have been sung at baptism. Further, the close resemblance between this latter passage and St. Paul's argument on the significance of baptism in Rom. vi. 3ff may prompt us to ask whether the influence of Christian "liturgy" is not to be traced behind many passages which we have been accustomed to regard primarily as "theology". A passage which in this connection deserves serious consideration is Phil. ii. 6ff, which tells of Christ's "self-emptying" and consequent "exaltation". Instead of reading it as a highly developed Christological argument we ought rather to regard it as based on a Christian hymn (Aramaic perhaps in origin) in which Christ, who is exalted, is contrasted with the first Adam, who fell.⁽¹⁾ The whole atmosphere of the passage is that of the Church at worship.

This passage from Philippians culminates in the triumphant confession: "Jesus Christ is Lord." Again and again this short confession of faith rings through the pages of the New Testament—a reminder that in addition to expressing their faith in song the early Christians were made familiar with short credal statements, notably (and at first perhaps exclusively) of a Christological character. "Confess with your mouth", says St. Paul in Rom. x. 9, "that 'Jesus is Lord'"—adding, by way of interpretation: "believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead." So also in I Cor. xii. 3 it is claimed that the confession "Jesus is Lord" is one which can only be made under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Candidates for baptism were no doubt expected to make this or some similar confession; we may refer to the case of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts viii. 37—a verse which, however, is absent in certain important MSS. And the story as there told, taken in conjunction with other New Testament passages, may perhaps indicate that in the baptismal service there was sometimes a recognized liturgical sequence: the question was asked: "Does anything (or anyone) stand in the way of baptism being administered?", and, on the required

(1) I may refer to my book *Jesus, Son of Man*, p. 193.

assurance being given, the candidate professed his faith and was baptized.

It was clearly essential that converts to Christianity, like converts to Judaism, should receive instruction in the truths and obligations of their new faith; and such instruction, given to individuals at baptism, would become the basis for further instruction given from time to time in the Christian assemblies and applied both to the individual believer and to the Church as a whole. One of the most interesting developments in the recent study of the New Testament Epistles has been the attempt to trace in them the main lines along which such instruction was apparently given.⁽¹⁾ The substance of I Peter (I. 3—iv. 11) acquires a new significance if we can read it as embodying baptismal instruction given to converts from heathenism—instruction which may have been prepared by Silas, to whom tribute is paid in chap. v., verse 12 in connection with the writing of the Epistle. From I Thess. iv. 1ff (where again it may be permissible to trace the influence of Silas, whose name is joined with St. Paul's in the opening verse of the Epistle) it would appear that the Thessalonian converts had already received (probably at baptism) a primitive Christian Holiness Code, enjoining the avoidance of pagan lust and the cultivation of Christian love; and with this we may compare I Peter i. 13-23. Further, the close parallelism to be found in the ethical sections of many of the Epistles is best explained if the exhortations now given by letter are meant to recall and enforce the catechetical instruction given to believers at baptism; we may compare the reference in I Thess. iv. 2 to "commandments which we gave you by the Lord Jesus". In such instruction the eschatological note was sounded throughout. Dying with Christ and so being raised with him, the believer experienced a "new birth" (or, as St. Paul preferred to say, a "new creation"); he "put off" the old evil habits, and instead he "put on" Christ. Then, as new problems arose in the various churches, additional or more detailed instruction came to be given on such subjects as Christian vigilance in face of temptation, Christian duty in domestic and social relationships, Christian reactions to the challenges of paganism, Christian endurance and hope under the stress of persecution. Such instruction would in many cases

⁽¹⁾ Reference may be made to *The Primitive Christian Catechism*, by P. Carrington, Bishop of Quebec, and to E. G. Selwyn's *Commentary on I Peter* (Essay II, pp. 363ff).

have been reinforced by appeals to the example or the words of Christ. It was still in a form which allowed considerable freedom to the Christian teachers who imparted it. But it nevertheless seems in general to have followed certain familiar lines ; and we are to think of it as being given in succinct and direct language, and perhaps in a form which could be easily memorized and repeated.

The Church of the New Testament took its faith seriously ; and its seriousness was reflected not merely in its missionary zeal, but also in the standards of its worship and in the care which it took to build up its members in Christian faith and in Christian life. Inevitably the question arises : has the Church of to-day not much to learn, in these respects as in others, from the Church of the New Testament ? To that question there can be only one answer. And the training given to Church members—whether it be the training conveyed through the uplifting of the soul in worship, or the catechetical training given in Sunday School, Bible Class, Instruction-Class for Catechumens, and so on—fails of its purpose unless the believer is given something which becomes part of his very being, and which, though it may for long lie dormant, can be summoned from the depths, or it may be spring suddenly unsought into life, in an hour of trial. A Church which has no Prayer-Book for regular use along with the Bible must see to it that the lack of it is supplied in other ways. In our Metrical Psalms and Paraphrases and in the best of our Hymns we have in Scotland a rich repository for worship and instruction if only our people, and more especially our youth, were trained to make more conscious use of it ; and they have the advantage of being easily memorized and capable of expression in song. A judicious selection from such a source, together with a few selected passages or verses from Holy Scripture, might well be made available as a believer's *Vade Mecum*. The *Te Deum Laudamus* may stir many a heart that the Nicene Creed leaves cold.

You will readily understand that it has not been my purpose to-day to pursue my subject in any detail, or to penetrate into wider fields of enquiry which the trained student will see opening out before him ; and in particular I have said nothing at all on the New Testament evidence regarding the celebration of the Lord's Supper. But I would remind you how, working from a variety of angles (biblical, historical and theological) not a few younger scholars in Scotland are preparing the soil from which, may

we hope, there will blossom in due time a revived tradition of Christian worship, a tradition which need not be less truly Scottish because it seeks to be truly thirled to the Scriptures as well as being in accord with the noblest liturgical traditions of the Church throughout the ages.

In conclusion I should like to reinforce the plea which is now frequently made for a more intimate alliance between theological scholarship and liturgical theory and practice. Any divorce between these partners, each of which is a necessary expression of the faith of the Church, is bound to be detrimental to both. Such a divorce was tragically manifest in Continental Protestantism in the period before the First World War, though subsequent experiences, which have served to revitalize both theology and Church worship, have gone far towards healing that breach. It would be tragic if, through indifference or blindness, we were at any time to allow a similar breach to assert itself in Scotland. Theological teaching in the Scottish Universities has generally been in the hands of men who were loyal members, if not indeed ministers, of the Church; and the hope may be expressed that this practice will continue. But along with the recent revival in theological thinking we must also hope and pray for a corresponding revival in the life and worship of the Church. The emphasis now laid on the "ecumenical" character of the Church seems to call for the development of more truly "ecumenical" standards in our worship. The essence of a people's religion is always revealed in their ways of worship. And in these days when the heavens and the earth are being shaken the call must again be sounded with urgency and conviction: "Let us worship God. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy hath begotten us again to a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."

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