

## **The Nature and Function of Theology**

Two preachers articulate contrasting views of authority in a well-known woodcut from the sixteenth century. The Roman Catholic is arrogantly wagging his finger at the congregation and saying, "*Sic dicit Papa.*" The Protestant, his finger humbly pointed at the page of Scripture, declares, "*Haec dicit dominus de.*" The artist, needless to say, was Protestant!

Like so many other slogans, however, the Protestant Reformers' *sola scriptura* both revealed and concealed important issues. What it revealed was their conviction that Christian theology in its form and substance as well as its function in the church must be determined by God's authoritative Word, the written Scriptures. Given the sufficiency of Scripture, "whatsoever is not read therein," declares Article VI of the Thirty-nine Articles, "nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation."<sup>(1)</sup> What the slogan concealed was the complexity of the process involved in understanding God's Word in the context of cultures far removed in time and psychological texture from those in which the revelation was originally given. It is this complexity which I wish to analyze in order that I may say how it is that evangelical theologians today ought to construe the significance of the *sola scriptura* principle for their work.

## **The Nature of Evangelical Theology**

The nature of evangelical theology is determined for it by the nature of that Word of which it is the exposition and application. The Word of God is the unique, written disclosure of God's character, will, acts, and plans. It is given so that men and women who have come to faith through its teaching might learn to live in God's world on his terms, loving and honoring him in all that they do and seeking to make known to the world his law and gospel. That is the purpose of God's revelation and the task of theology is to facilitate this.

This facilitation begins with the recognition of the bipolar nature of biblical revelation. Biblical revelation was given in a particular cultural context but it is also intended to be heard in our own context. This revelatory trajectory, then, has a point of origination and a point of arrival. It is the fact of inspiration and the contemporary work of the Spirit which secure a consistency between its *terminus a quo* and its *terminus a quem*. The work of the Holy Spirit was such that the responsible human agents who were used in the writing of Scripture were able to employ cultural materials and, indeed, to shape the revelation in terms of their own understanding, but what God the Spirit willed should be revealed was exactly what was written, and the content and intent of this revelation were alike transcultural. The biblical revelation, because of its inspired nature, can therefore be captive neither to the culture in which it arose nor to the culture in which it arrives. It was not distorted as it was given, nor need it be distorted as we seek to understand it many centuries later in contexts far removed from those

in which it was originally given.

The bipolar character of revelation is what Krister Stendahl appears to have had in mind in the distinction he has drawn between what Scripture "means" and what it "meant."<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, however, this is a distinction which can be understood. Much modern theology is of the opinion that contemporary meaning is largely uncontrolled by and different from biblical meaning. What Scripture says, it is argued, is to be determined by the cultures in which it was given and what it means is to be determined by, and not merely related to, our own modern culture. This approach destroys any meaningful understanding of the Spirit's work in inspiration and Muniination.

It is the task of theology, then, to discover what God has said in and through Scripture and to clothe that in a conceptuality which is native to our own age. Scripture, at its *terminus a quo*, needs to be de-contextualized in order to grasp its transcultural content, and it needs to be re-contextualized in order that its content may be meshed with the cognitive assumptions and social patterns of our own time. This process, I suggest, is helpfully illustrated by the way in which our electronic media work. Prior to the electronic age there were only three factors involved in communication: the orator; the speech; and the audience. With the new media the orator has become the sending source and the audience is the receptor. The speech has become a message which now also has to be encoded by the sending source and decoded by the receptor. In all, then, there are

now five components in the process. With a little adaptation this model might graphically represent the theological task(3) in this way

It is now my purpose to examine this process, focusing principally on the two poles or foci in the theological task. This I wish to do by redefining, for the purposes of this essay, my use of two words: doctrine and theology.(4)

### **Doctrine and the Pole of Revelation**

Doctrine is what the Bible says on any subject. We speak of "the doctrine of the atonement," "the doctrine of Christ," or "the doctrine of God," and what we have in mind is the collective testimony from the various biblical authors as to what should be believed about the atonement, about Christ, and about God. The word *doctrine* is therefore being used in a way that is flexible enough to accommodate the variety of biblical teaching on these and other subjects as well as the factor of development in some themes as we move from the Old Testament into the New Testament. Our doctrinal categories can be neither artificial, so as to impose an order on the biblical revelation which is not itself a part of the revelation, nor wooden, so as to exclude testimony which does not fall within the prescribed pattern. The doctrinal form must arise from and faithfully represent the revelatory content which the doctrine is seeking to present. This question, of how doctrine should be derived, now needs to be addressed more specifically, first positively and then negatively.

### *Principles of Construction*

The process of deriving doctrine has three facets

to it. These facets are not so much stages, distinguished from one another in a chronological sequence, as they are characteristics of a single process and as such always function together with each other in any healthy formulation. These facets or characteristics may be designated as the scientific, artistic, and sacral.(5)

The use of the word *scientific* in this context is undoubtedly provocative. It may conjure up memories of an earlier phase in American evangelical theology in which theology was customarily spoken of as being a science or a still earlier phase in which theology used to be described as the "queen of the sciences." Nothing so triumphalistic is in mind here! There is, however, an analogy between the two activities which is helpful to observe.

In both cases there is objective data which needs to be understood, organized, and explained. The explanation with the greatest plausibility is the one which best explains the most data. Whether one is dealing with scientific hypotheses and theories in the one case or doctrines in the other, the explanation must always remain subservient to and open to correction by the data being explained. Scientific theories cannot be sustained in cavalier disregard for the facts and neither can doctrines. Both the foundation and the parameters of any doctrinal formulation must be provided by careful, honest, skillful exegesis. Doctrine which is not at its heart exegetical is not at its heart evangelical; doctrine which develops a life of its own and blithely disregards what Scripture says is

also blithely disregarding what God says. That is what it means to have an inspired Scripture and this is the import of the *sola scriptura* principle for doctrine.

It is a myth, however, to suppose that this process, either in science or in biblical study, proceeds merely according to external laws without reference to the inner life of the interpreter! It is for this reason that, in addition to the scientific dimension, mention is here made of the artistic and sacred.

By the word *artistic*, what is in mind is the place of understanding and even of self-understanding in the construction of doctrine. For, in the nature of the case, the fruit of exegesis has to be constructed into a synthetic whole and that construction is significantly affected by the pre-understanding, the presuppositions, the experience, and the psychology of the interpreter. The ideal we need to hold out to ourselves, then, is that of faithful resonance between the realities being spoken of in Scripture and our own understanding of those realities. An interpreter whose grasp of the life and meaning of sin is shallow will, for example, almost inevitably understand the teaching of Scripture on sin in a shallow manner and the doctrinal structure which results will be correspondingly deformed. The interpreter's cognitive presuppositions and his or her spiritual capacity for understanding the truth of God are fundamental in the formation of doctrine.

This, however, leads naturally into the third factor,