

EDITORIAL

Fair or Foul Play?

The great issue in theology today, not, however, to be reserved for the deliberation of “professional” theologians only, is the question as to whether the immediate post-New Testament developments in doctrine and practice were legitimate outgrowths of apostolic Christianity or plain departures from the faith. The “anabaptist” position of this JOURNAL, with its “Testimony to Biblical Unitarianism,” is that the work of the early church fathers sowed the seed of a degenerate and distorted form of the faith which, with the passing of centuries, developed into what we now know as mainstream Christianity in both its Roman Catholic and Protestant types.

Our belief is that the dictum of Professor Loofs, distinguished authority on the development of dogma (1858-1928), ought to be considered seriously if we are properly to evaluate contemporary Christianity in the light of the Bible. Professor Loofs proposed that with Justin Martyr in the mid-second century the faith took a fatal turn under the influence of pagan philosophy (in which many of the “Fathers” had been trained prior to their conversion).

Loofs wrote:

The Apologists [“Church Fathers” like Justin Martyr, mid-second century] laid the foundation for the perversion [Verkehrung] of Christianity into a revealed [philosophical] teaching. Specifically, their Christology affected the later development disastrously. By taking for granted the transfer of the concept of Son of God onto the preexisting Christ, they were the cause of the Christological problem of the fourth century. They caused a shift in the point of departure of Christological thinking — away from the historical Christ and onto the issue of preexistence. They thus shifted attention away from the historical life of Jesus, putting it into the shadow and promoting instead the Incarnation. They tied Christology to cosmology and could not tie it to soteriology. The Logos teaching is not a “higher” Christology than the customary one. It lags in fact far behind the genuine appreciation of Christ. According to their teaching it is no longer God who reveals Himself in

Christ, but the Logos, the inferior God, a God who as God is subordinated to the Highest God (inferiorism or subordinationism).

In addition, the suppression of economic-trinitarian ideas by metaphysical-pluralistic concepts of the divine triad (trias) can be traced to the Apologists¹

It seems to us that this disastrous development is a documented fact which has not been reckoned with. A major shift of theological base occurred. Floodlights were removed from the historical Jesus and turned towards abstract questions about his “pre-natal” existence in heaven, whether as a created “angel” or later, from Origen onwards, as “eternally begotten Son.” The historical Jesus and his Messianic Gospel of the Kingdom were cast into a shadow. Center stage in his place appeared tortuous discussions over questions which the Bible does not raise. Worse still, the “resolution” of those questions in the form of the creeds of the Councils fixed the shape of Christianity for subsequent generations. This was not, however, its original shape. It was a new religion in which the Hebrew thought world of the Bible was recast in the mold of an alien philosophy.

The immediate casualty of the second-century development was the Gospel as Jesus preached it. To this day evangelism almost always bypasses the Gospel of the historical Jesus and begins with his death. Modern popular evangelism actually follows in practice the method of Bultmann, who thought that the historical Jesus was irrecoverable. The historical Messiah was even irrelevant for Bultmann’s view of faith as existential.

One of the most interesting ways of tackling the issue of whether the developments brought about by the post-biblical “Fathers” were legitimate or detrimental is to consider the state of Trinitarianism in the time of Tertullian, in the third century. If the Trinity represents a proper reading of the Bible and the teaching of Jesus, certainly its existence as a well-defined doctrine will be continuous with the New Testament. But the facts are these. Even Tertullian, considered to be the father of Western Christianity, did not believe in the Trinity as it was later formulated. As is well known, he did not believe that there were three coequal, coeternal persons in the Godhead. Tertullian wrote that “there was a time when the

¹ *Leitfaden zum Studium des Dogmengeschichte [Manual for the Study of the History of Dogma]*, part 1 ch. 2, section 18: “Christianity as a Revealed Philosophy. The Greek Apologists,” 1890, Niemeyer Verlag 1951, 97, translation ours.

Son did not exist . . .” (Against Hermogenes, ch. 3). Tertullian believed that the Son of God had a beginning of existence, just prior to the Genesis creation. This is not Trinitarian belief. As the learned professor of ecclesiastical history at Yale, G. P. Fisher, DD, LLD, wrote: “Tertullian fails to reach the full Trinitarian statement.”² These facts can be confirmed in any good text dealing with the history of Christian dogma.

A second line of investigation is to ponder the results of modern biblical exegesis and especially the great advances in the knowledge of the Jewish background of the New Testament. These have brought ever more clearly to light the basic fact that “to be called Son of God in the Bible means you are not God.”³ Most churchgoers, thinking that in the Scripture “Son of God” is to be read as “God the Son,” fall into the mistake of reading much later Trinitarian creedal terminology back into the Bible. This of course distorts the meaning of the biblical text and titles for Jesus. The right way is to approach the text with awareness of the meaning of Jesus’ titles in their own context. Any Bible reader can establish for himself that in a biblical context “Son of God” means a human being or even angel, especially related to God, but certainly not God Himself. Israel was called “Son of God” (Ex. 4:22; Hos. 11:1) and Christians are “sons of God.” But, as Dr. Brown points out, “Son of God” is not the title of Deity.

Finally, Jesus is constantly called “Lord” in the New Testament: Lord Jesus, Lord Messiah, our Lord Jesus Messiah, etc. The title “lord” stems from the frequently quoted passage in Psalm 110:1 where the Messiah is predicted to become “the lord.” But the word for “lord” in the Hebrew text here is a form which distinguishes man from God. The “lord” of this Psalm is expressly not the Lord God, but the human Lord Messiah. The title used of the Messiah here never refers to God. The Hebrew text uses a word designed to tell us that its subject is not the Lord God. The guardians of the sacred text were very careful to distinguish the one Lord God from human lords. Jews knew well, and still know, that the Messiah is the supreme agent of the One God, but certainly not actually God. There is after all only one God. And Paul defines Him as the Father (1 Cor. 8:4).

The radical understanding of our tradition sees the eclipse of the historical Jesus and the shift to a speculative Greek philosophical

² *History of Christian Doctrine*, T&T Clark, 1908, 91.

³ Colin Brown, Ph. D, in *Ex Auditu* 7, 1991. Dr. Brown is general editor of the prestigious *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*.

Christology reflected in modern popular evangelism. James Kennedy says:

Many people today think that the essence of Christianity is Jesus' teaching, but that is not so . . . Christianity centers not in the teachings of Jesus, but in the person of Jesus as Incarnate God who came into the world to take upon Himself our guilt and die in our place.⁴

⁴ "How I know Jesus is God," *Truths that Transform*, Nov. 11, 1989.