

The Rise and Fall of The Biblical Theology Movement

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Abstract: The Biblical Theology Movement was a Post-World War Two Neo-orthodox trend by nonconservative Biblical Scholars that attempted to solve the problems inherent in classic Liberalism. In its late 19th and early 20th Century form, theological liberalism was inextricably wedded to a historical criticism that focused unduly on the process of the development of Scripture and avoided the theological significance of the Biblical message. It assumed an antisupernaturalism that made hearing a genuine Word from God impossible, and therefore left liberal preachers with no message that could heal a hurting world. Scholars turned to Barthianism to obtain the spiritual power present in orthodox theology, but without what they saw as the anti-intellectualism of fundamentalism. Genuine intentions to hear God's supernatural voice failed because they refused to adopt the worldview that made the language of traditional orthodoxy authentic.

Key Words: Biblical Theology, Fundamentalism, Liberalism, Neo-orthodoxy, Special Revelation, Biblical Languages

In Hollywood, once the story is completed it ends. The bad guys lose, and the good guys live happily ever after. But in real life, the story is still in process, moving forward to the eternal state. God has guaranteed the ultimate triumph of his sovereign will. But until it does, sometimes the bad guys win. Such is the story of the Fundamentalist/Modernist controversy, as told by conservatives. The Liberals won, the Fundamentalists

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lost, and by the 1940s, virtually all of them had been driven out of the mainline denominations. In the aftermath, the Fundamentalists rebuilt and slowly acquired power. They changed into the modern evangelical movement. But what happened to the Liberals? They too changed. The winds of Barthianism swept into the US in the 1930s, along with the evident failure of classic Liberalism to account for the World Wars and the Great Depression. People were desperate to hear a word from God to heal their broken and shattered world. Conservatives were providing this word; Liberalism could not. A return to orthodoxy was unthinkable, but something had to be done. The solution was an attempt to provide a word from God while maintaining the historical critical assumptions of Liberalism. Childs labeled this attempt the Biblical Theology Movement.²

I. What was the Biblical Theology Movement?

Ask an average Christian to define biblical theology and one is quite likely to get some variation of “theology that is biblical.” In this sense all theology rightly done is biblical theology. Whether one seeks to write a systematic theology, trace a theme through Scripture, or analyze the specific teachings of a book or author, all of them must be fundamentally biblical to be of any value to the church. However, as helpful as it may be to assert that our theology must be derived from the only written source of special revelation, this definition is no help in distinguishing the various disciplines of biblical study.³

A more specific definition makes it possible to distinguish from systematic theology on the one hand and exegesis on the other. In this sense biblical theology is that branch of theological study that traces distinctive themes in various sections of the Bible, focusing on how a particular theme is progressively

² Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 13–30.

³ For this definition and the two following, see Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 9–12.

revealed in Scripture.⁴ Examples of thematic studies can be found from the earliest days of the church; however biblical theology as a modern theological discipline is usually credited to J. P. Gabler in his 1787 inaugural address *de justo discrimine theologiae bibilicae et dogmaticae* (On the Proper Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology). Gabler argued that a distinction between a purely historical biblical theology and dogmatic study would prevent theological discord by separating the timeless, simple teachings of Scripture from the complex, subtle conclusions from a theologian. This discipline was to create a firm foundation for dogmatics from timelessly valid concepts. Gabler conceived of this as a purely descriptive discipline with no attempt to apply the Bible to contemporary life.⁵ As scholars took up the challenge, two things became clear during the 18th and 19th centuries. First, a division between Old and New Testament theology was immediate and inevitable. Second, the attempt to create a purely objective discipline in accordance with Enlightenment principles was not possible. In the creation of their theologies, biblical theologians could not avoid importing their philosophical and theological convictions.⁶ Modern theologians are divided on whether biblical theology should be descriptive or normative. Stendahl distinguishes what a text meant from what it means today. He argues that the biblical theologian's job is to make plain what the author meant; what it means today is the job of the systematic theologian and the

⁴ For a good overview of the history and method of biblical theology from an evangelical perspective see Grant R. Osborne, "Biblical Theology," in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 339–346.

⁵ For a translation and commentary on the Latin original see John Sandys-Wunsch and Laurence Eldredge, "J P Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of His Originality," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33, no. 2 (1980): 133–158.

⁶ For a history of biblical theology that includes efforts before Gabler as well as a survey of 18th and 19th century biblical theologians, see Henning Graf Reventlow, "Theology (Biblical), History of," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:483–505.

preacher. He is so confident in the method that he asserts that the believer and agnostic alike can perform this descriptive task.⁷ For the normative approach, Lemke argues that even when pure description is the goal, normative dimensions creep in by how the biblical data is selected and interpreted. The intention of the text itself is against complete neutrality, since it presupposes the reality of God who seeks a personal response from his creatures. Theology is more than just the study of religious ideas; it must be concerned with truth for today. It is the Bible's ability to speak meaningfully to the present age that explains its preservation by generation after generation.⁸

A third and even more specific definition of biblical theology is found in Brevard Childs's *Biblical Theology in Crisis*. Childs describes an approach to biblical studies in America from the close of World War II to about 1965. This approach he calls the Biblical Theology Movement. Although it was heavily influenced by European scholars, it had a peculiarly American character and its concept of the theological task was different compared to those who came before and after.⁹ It also heavily borrowed from Neo-orthodox theologians such as Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Richard Niebuhr.¹⁰ It is the specific approach that Childs calls the "Biblical Theology Movement" that concerns us.

II. Is "Biblical Theology Movement" a Misnomer?

But was there such a thing as the Biblical Theology Movement? James Smart argues that the term is a misnomer. According to him, a movement suggests an organization and conferences, with scholars working in close cooperation and theological agreement. There was no formal organization and

⁷ Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon P, 1962), 1:418–432.

⁸ Werner E. Lemke, "Theology (Old Testament)," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:454–455.

⁹ Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, 13.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 16–17, 56.

scholars came from widely differing theological perspectives. He argues that Barth, Brunner, Niebuhr, and Paul Tillich were far too different to be lumped together as “neo-orthodox.”¹¹ The American movement was part of a broader scene. Similar struggles took place in Britain and the Continent.¹² Lemke objects that biblical theology was not in a state of crisis or dissolution, but rather it entered a period of transition and reassessment. Scholars and laity alike had been too glib about their theological conceptions, then woke up one day to discover a serious gap between their abstractions and their religious experience.¹³

But these objections are more about definitions than substance. It is true that the Biblical Theology Movement had no organization and had great theological diversity. However, the term “movement” will not go away. Smart himself uses the term to describe theological fads rather than carefully organized coalitions of scholars.¹⁴ He admits that “all...who became interested in biblical theology were thrown into a measure of alliance by their confrontation with a common enemy.”¹⁵ And “that developments in biblical theology in America have had a different context and a somewhat different character from those in Britain and Europe.”¹⁶ Childs well replies that “Smart has offered no new evidence for his position.” He admits that the relationship between American and European scholars during this period were not well explored in his book.¹⁷ No great theological agreement is implied by the term “neo-orthodox,” but one must have some label for the group, if for no other reason than as a practical shorthand. Finally, Lemke misunderstands the intent of Child’s label “crisis.” There is no evidence in the book that he believes that biblical theology was in a state of

¹¹ James D. Smart, *The Past, Present, and Future of Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), 23–26.

¹² *Ibid.*, 74–84.

¹³ Lemke, “Theology (Old Testament),” 453.

¹⁴ Smart, *Past, Present, and Future of Biblical Theology*, 9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁷ Childs, “The Past, Present, and Future of Biblical Theology,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 100, no. 2 (June 1981): 252–253.

dissolution. A “crisis” is “a time of intense difficulty or danger,” not “the formal ending of an assembly.”¹⁸ Childs, far from suggesting that theologians of the seventies were no longer interested in biblical theology, says that present-day leading biblical scholars still identified with the long-range goals of the movement. He argues that few of them wish to return to the minutiae of historicocritical scholarship.¹⁹ James Barr similarly suggests that there was indeed a crisis in biblical theology, but this crisis was precipitated by a loss of prestige, not a loss of interest in biblical theology. The problem was that the movement had arrayed itself against history but was not careful to consider opposition from theology.²⁰

Therefore, there is merit in identifying the mid-20th century Neo-orthodox trend as the “Biblical Theology Movement.” It makes little difference if one calls it a “movement,” a “trend,” a “stage,” or some other term. But since there is no other established label than the one suggested by Childs, it is wise to stick with that one. Yet one must recognize that this is a technical term for a specific theological period; it does not refer to all possible examples of biblical theology.

III. How did the Biblical Theology Movement Begin?

After the close of World War II, a series of books and articles flooded forth that made a clear break with the prevailing theological trends.²¹ In particular, the history of religions school (*religionsgeschichtliche Schule*) was criticized for devolving into historical and literary minutia. Smart shows that this phenomenon had been the prevailing trend from 1875 to the 1930s.²² A focus on purely historical description was supposed to avoid eisegesis of one’s theology back into the Scriptures.

¹⁸ OED, “crisis” and “dissolution.”

¹⁹ Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, 91–92.

²⁰ James Barr, “The Theological Case against Biblical Theology,” in *Canon, Theology, and Old Testament Interpretation: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*, ed. Gene M. Tucker, David L. Petersen, and Robert R. Wilson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 4–5.

²¹ For a bibliography of the period, see Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, 14–17.

²² Smart, *Past, Present, and Future of Biblical Theology*, 54.

However, this was achieved by striving to be untheological and totally objective. Yet total objectivity on matters of personal convictions is impossible. Smart says, "A man, if he is a thinking creature, can no more escape from allegiance to some theology... than he can escape his own skin."²³ His solution to this problem is to let the Bible speak for itself the way we do for another human mind. Second, Smart puts the blame for a purely descriptive OT theology on a renewed interest in history. This had the beneficial effect, he claims, of making plain the historical development of Israel's literature. However, in the effort to explain everything by historical means, it was forgotten that the living God cannot be explained by historical description. Indeed, so infatuated was the history of religions school with evolutionary development and progress, that the Scriptures were forced into a Procrustean bed to make them fit their ideas of spiritual and religious development. Third, the rise of Liberal theology led people to substitute "religion" for "theology." Schleiermacher had defined the heart of Christianity as religious experience rather than doctrine in an effort to reach the intelligent despisers of religion. As this developed any religious experience was acceptable. Thus, by a strange inversion, the pursuit of religious experience over ideas led to the bare description of history instead of theological conviction.²⁴

A. The Emotional Precedent: The Problem of Anti-theological Liberalism

But perhaps better than just cataloging the changing focus from historical to theological is the testimony of those connected with the movement. The Biblical Theology Movement arose when Liberal scholars discovered that a purely historical description of religion gave them nothing of value to speak to the contemporary world. Smart movingly describes his own confusion when he discovered that his superior education did not sufficiently equip him to preach in an ordinary church.

²³ Smart, "The Death and Rebirth of Old Testament Theology," *The Journal of Religion* 23, no. 1 (January 1943): 5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 6–9.

My own experience may well have been typical. Completing a doctorate in the Semitics department of the University of Toronto in 1931, I was advised by the professor under whom I had done most of my work to spend the next ten years bringing myself abreast of these ‘assured results.’ [Smart emphasized that] the body of these assured results was so impressive that any serious questioning of them seemed irresponsible ... One of them was the nonexistence of an Old Testament theology.

This anti-theological bias of biblical scholarship...was eventually to produce a reaction. After nine years of study under some of the most competent Old Testament scholars in North America, I became a village pastor with the task of preaching and teaching the Christian gospel upon the basis of the Old Testament as well as the New. The question of how the sacred literature of Hebrews and Jews becomes Christian Scripture had never been discussed in my hearing either in three years in seminary or in my years in graduate school!... I could no longer evade the basic theological question. In what way were these Scriptures a unique revelation of God? How was their essential content to be translated into meaningful language for my people?... I found both Testaments coming open in a new way to speak to our need.

What was difficult to understand was why anyone involved academically in biblical research should object to this discovery of fresh relevance for the biblical text! The only possible explanation was that a professionally untheological biblical science was affronted by a process that brought to light in Scripture a theological content that at some essential points contradicted the former ‘assured results.’²⁵

Otto Piper had a similar experience. Unlike Smart, there was no sudden crisis and change, but rather a gradual development in his thinking. Born in Germany, he spent his younger years in Europe. He was most unimpressed by the antireligious literature then current, as it reminded him of the Youth Movement he had abandoned. His studies at “the most outstanding theological

²⁵ Smart, *Past, Present, and Future of Biblical Theology*, 46–48.

schools of pure liberal tradition” gave him extensive reading in the historical critical school. But he was disturbed by the difference between his rigorously objective training and the subjectivism he perceived “in almost every interpretive work of twentieth century critical theology.”²⁶ While studying in Paris, he encountered Huguenot students at the seminary who impressed him by their zeal for the gospel. They treated the Bible as the book of the church, not as just another literary masterpiece. His need for a valid religion was only heightened by his participation as a soldier in World War I and by Germany’s subsequent defeat. When he began teaching at the University of Göttingen, he struggled to develop a unified message of the Bible in contrast to the methods he was familiar with, a method that saw fundamental differences in the teachings of various biblical writers. World War II forced him into exile and eventually led him to the US to teach at Princeton. Contact with Bible-loving adherents of a Keswick theology created a desire in him to factor the work of the Holy Spirit into his theological task.²⁷

***B. The Historical Precedent:
The Fundamentalist/Modernist Controversy***

Although one can trace the shift from descriptive to normative biblical theology on both sides of the Atlantic, the scene in America was different. What made it different was the legacy of the controversy between Liberals and Fundamentalists between the 1910s and 30s.²⁸ It is at this point that it is important to define our terms. Both “Liberalism” and “Fundamentalism” have been used loosely by the opposite sides to insult a view that one disagreed with that was more conservative or more progressive than one’s own view. When used this way the terms become devoid of real meaning. It is the Fundamentalism after the controversy began but prior to its existence as a separatist movement that concerns us here. Curtis Lee Laws coined the term in 1920: “We suggest that those who will still cling to the great

²⁶ Otto Alfred Piper, “What the Bible Means to Me 1: Discovering the Bible,” *The Christian Century* 63, no. 9 (February 27, 1946): 266.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, 19.

fundamentals and who mean to do battle royal for the fundamentals shall be called ‘Fundamentalists.’”²⁹ By the fundamentals he refers to those points that have traditionally marked historic orthodox Christianity.³⁰ There were many responses to Liberalism of the day that sought to distill the essentials of Christianity. The 1910 General assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the USA listed five fundamentals that are justly famous.³¹ They are the inerrancy of Scripture, the virgin birth, the substitutionary atonement, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and the reality of Jesus’ miracles. The committee added that other articles of faith were equally necessary.³²

The kind of Liberalism under discussion is the religious variety that existed in the 19th and early 20th centuries. This theological aberration began as rationalistic naturalism began to triumph amid the intellectual elite. Darwin’s *Origin of the Species*, while not the only source of this philosophy, certainly had a tremendous influence. In its 19th century form, evolution had a devastating effect on the biblical claims to authority and inerrancy. Philosophical modernism was intent on fully understanding the world without recourse to the supernatural. It

²⁹ Curtis Lee Laws, “Convention Side Lights,” *Watchman Examiner* 8, no. 27 (July 1, 1920): 834.

³⁰ This is not the place for a history of Fundamentalism. For several excellent full-length studies, as well as extensive bibliographies, see Jeffrey Paul Straub, *The Making of a Battle Royal: The Rise of Liberalism in Northern Baptist Life, 1870-1920*, Monographs in Baptist history 8 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018); Kevin T. Bauder and Robert G. Delnay, *One in Hope and Doctrine: Origins of Baptist Fundamentalism 1870-1950* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Books, 2014); David Beale, *In Pursuit of Purity: American Fundamentalism since 1850* (Greenville, SC: Unusual Publications, 1986).

³¹ The Biblical Theology Movement was led primarily by Presbyterian scholars, though it was certainly not confined to them. Since no effort is being made to be complete about the prehistory of the Biblical Theology Movement, Presbyterian documents have been used as examples because they are most relevant to the present discussion.

³² General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the USA, “The Doctrinal Deliverance of 1910,” *PCA Historical Center*, accessed October 30, 2018, <http://www.pcahistory.org/documents/deliverance.html>.

was believed that the observer could penetrate the mysteries of the universe by sufficiently objective scientific methods. Julius Wellhausen's JEDP theory was intended to demonstrate that Judaism developed by the natural product of evolution from fetishism to polytheism and eventually to monotheism.³³ As advocates for source and form critical methods multiplied, the omniscience of higher critical methods was so impressive in many circles that "the assured results of higher criticism" were thought to be impregnable.

Simultaneous with the rise of rationalistic naturalism was the pressure to modify Christianity according to the spirit of the age. We have already alluded to Schleiermacher and his replacement of doctrine with experience. This made it possible to avoid the increasingly troubling historical questions altogether. Since the miraculous and supernatural were increasingly maligned, these elements must be reinterpreted on naturalistic principles. Yet Liberals, or Modernists, as they were alternately known, for the most part continued to use traditional orthodox language, but with radically different meaning. Jesus is God, but by this they meant that the life of God that appears in all men is especially clear in him. They believe in God, but he may denote only the supreme object of men's desires.³⁴ They talk of the resurrection, but they make this to mean the permanence of his influence or a spiritual existence beyond the grave.³⁵ The few who spoke more forthrightly were quickly expelled from their denominations.³⁶ One feature that most were clear on was the inherent goodness of man. Evil did not exist in man's heart, but only in his environment. Thus, by education and societal reform the world's goodness would overcome its evil without any outside sources

³³ For a short summary of Wellhausen, see Norman L. Geisler, "Wellhausen, Julius," in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 770–771. See also Douglas A. Knight, ed., "Julius Wellhausen and His Prolegomena to the History of Israel," *Semeia* 25 (1982): 1–155.

³⁴ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1923), 110.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

³⁶ For example, Charles Briggs was suspended from Presbyterian ministry in 1893. See Beale, *In Pursuit of Purity*, 143–145.

needed. Of course, they did not see themselves as the destroyers of the Christian faith. They were trying to save Christianity by making it relevant to the modern world. They believed that they did hold to the essentials of Christianity, but only denied the theories Fundamentalists used to explain them.³⁷ Yet as Machen cogently argues, by paring away all objectionable or unbelievable elements to the Christian faith, the resulting religion not only was not Christianity, but it also belonged in a different class of religion altogether.³⁸

What made the Fundamentalist/Modernist controversy a deciding factor in the character of what followed it in America was the bitterness of the debate. There are several good ways of illustrating this. The process by which Liberalism gained control of Baptist and Presbyterian denominations, and the heavy cost incurred when the inevitable split took place might be outlined. Space would not permit anything approaching a fair survey. A better approach is to provide an example of the debate in action. No better example can be furnished than the controversy between Harry Emerson Fosdick and Clarence Macartney. On May 21, 1922, just two years after the term “Fundamentalist” was coined, Fosdick preached his famous sermon “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” from the First Presbyterian Church in New York. The sermon is a passionate appeal for tolerance, yet his portrait of Fundamentalists paints them as narrowminded obscurantists who would rather quarrel over who “should tithe mint and anise and cumin...when the world is perishing for the lack of the weightier matters of the law, justice, and mercy, and faith.”³⁹ He connects Fundamentalists with the intolerance of the Sanhedrin in Acts 5:38.⁴⁰ Finally, they are “giving us one of the worst exhibitions

³⁷ W. Robert Godfrey, “Faithful Vigilance,” *Tabletalk* (March 2006): 17.

³⁸ Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 6–7.

³⁹ Harry Emerson Fosdick, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?,” in *Sermons in American History: Selected Issues in the American Pulpit, 1630-1967*, ed. DeWitte Talmadge Holland, Hubert Vance Taylor, and Jess Yoder (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), 347.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 339.

of bitter intolerance that the churches of this country have ever seen.”⁴¹

Fosdick is unusually candid. He makes no mistake about rationalistic naturalism. Evolution, historical reconstructions, and comparative religious studies are considered “new knowledge” that is absolutely without the possibility of contradiction. Thus, just as it was necessary to integrate the Copernican revolution into a Christian worldview, it is equally necessary to integrate this new knowledge into the old faith.⁴²

He labels Fundamentalistic concerns as mere opinion:

If a man is a genuine liberal, his primary protest is not against holding these opinions, although he may well protest their being considered the fundamentals of Christianity...The question is, has anybody a right to deny the Christian name to those who differ with him on such points and to shut against them the doors of the Christian fellowship?⁴³

He is quite clear on what these opinions are. The substitutionary atonement is a “special theory” that “placates an alienated deity and makes possible welcome for the returning sinner.” The virgin birth is a “vexed and mooted question” and “a biological miracle that our modern minds cannot use.” The doctrine of inspiration implies that the Scriptures were “inerrantly dictated by God to men.” This theory of inspiration is “static and mechanical” and a “positive peril to the spiritual life.” The second coming does not mean a literal coming on the clouds of heaven. Rather, it means the slow gradual evolution of mankind from primitive to sophisticated and will eventually result in God’s will and principles being worked out in human life and institutions.⁴⁴

Clarence Macartney responded less than two months later with his sermon “Shall Unbelief Win?” His tone is quite irenic. He is quick to praise Fosdick’s frankness, eloquence, and

⁴¹ Ibid., 346.

⁴² Ibid., 339–340.

⁴³ Ibid., 341.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 340–345.

tolerance.⁴⁵ Rather than condemn the sermon, he recommends that it be read by fence-sitters so they can see that Fundamentalism and Liberalism cannot and should not be reconciled. As he considers Fosdick to be unorthodox, he expresses his hope that Fosdick will return to the evangelical faith. Yet he is also quite clear about the danger of Fosdick's theology. The virgin birth is not a linchpin doctrine because of its own merits, rather, it is a practical test as to whether someone believes in the divinity of Jesus. Denying it sets a precedence for using the same method to "repudiate any other part of the Gospel story." He suggests that it is disingenuous to earn one's living from a Presbyterian church whose creed confesses the virgin birth while simultaneously denying it.⁴⁶ On the inspiration of Scripture, Macartney gives a bit too much away by suggesting that some parts of Scripture are more inspired than others. Nevertheless, he questions whether men such as Fosdick believe the Bible has any special authority at all.⁴⁷ As for the second coming, he notes that Christ is more than a principle of righteousness, but a real person who will truly come.⁴⁸ On the atonement, he expresses wonder that Fosdick is only interested in demolishing the traditional theory and has no interest in how the atonement works. To place the virgin birth, the inspiration of the Bible, the second coming, and the atonement in the category of trifles is almost unpardonable flippancy.⁴⁹

In a subsequent letter, Fosdick complained that he was not treated fairly at all, and the position Macartney described was a preposterous caricature of his position. He claims to believe in the deity of Jesus, regardless of the question of the virgin birth. He holds that the Bible does have a special authority, but it is not the authority of a dictionary which carries inerrant answers to questions. Rather, it is like the authority of his mother, who was

⁴⁵ Clarence Edward Macartney, "Shall Unbelief Win?," in *Sermons in American History: Selected Issues in the American Pulpit, 1630-1967*, 349-351.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 355-356.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 356-358.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 359-360.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 362.

certainly not inerrant but who had a formative influence on his life. He believes in the vicarious sacrifice of Jesus, but not “a governmental theory of substitutionary punishment which was outlawed from every decent penal system on earth long ago.”⁵⁰

Macartney responds that the doctrinal issues he mentioned are indeed important. The virgin birth is found in Scripture and is the teaching of the church where Fosdick pastors. The substitutionary atonement is the only one taught in the Scriptures. He asserts that he did not miss Fosdick’s plea for tolerance, and he himself is sympathetic towards it. But he says, “I will not stop my mouth when I see or hear a proclamation of the word which is a violation of the New Testament.” He states that “the Christ whom you preach is not the Christ whom I preach and in whom I put my trust for this life and for that which is to come.”⁵¹

Because Fosdick was so honest with his beliefs, he came to the attention of the General Assembly. Up to this point, Fosdick had been ordained as a Baptist even though he was currently associate pastor at First Presbyterian. But now the Assembly attempted to force him to sign a doctrinal statement by requesting that he be ordained as a Presbyterian minister. Rather than subscribe to any confession of faith, he resigned in 1925. But he immediately found a new position at the Riverside Church.⁵²

Fosdick had predicted: “I do not believe for one moment that the Fundamentalists are going to succeed.”⁵³ Alas, he was quite correct. In both Baptist and Presbyterian denominations, Fundamentalists were gradually forced out and had to create their own associations, mission boards, and training institutions. Many pastors had to abandon their retirement accounts and some churches lost their buildings. By the 1940s even the most patient Fundamentalists had left. The Liberals had scored an almost total

⁵⁰ Harry Emerson Fosdick and Clarence Edward Macartney, “The Fosdick-Macartney Correspondence,” *The Interior* 53 (December 21, 1922): 1642.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1642, 1650.

⁵² Riverside was known as Park Avenue Baptist Church when Fosdick took the position. It was renamed the Riverside Church when John Rockefeller built a new building for him. See Beale, *In Pursuit of Purity*, 155, 187–188.

⁵³ Fosdick, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?,” 348.

victory. Yet it was a hollow victory. The Liberals too were battered and weary from the fighting. Because they valued experience and emotion over doctrine, even their most educated proponents had difficulty understanding what the fuss was all about. They still hoped for some way of bringing the two groups back together, though they remained immovably committed to higher critical methods. Furthermore, massive changes in society because of two World Wars and the Great Depression meant that the old Liberalism now seemed irrelevant. A change in theological focus was inevitable, though this change did not result in a return to conservative ideology.

B. The Theological Precedent: The Rise of Neo-Orthodoxy

The change was to come as Neo-orthodoxy began to filter into America through Germany. Biblical studies changed as theologians began to break with the Liberal tradition and interest in theology grew. While all the major Neo-orthodox theologians had an impact, that of Emil Brunner was especially significant,⁵⁴ raising the difficult problem of describing and defining Neo-orthodoxy. Mention has already been made of Smart's objection that there were too many differences to label them all "neo-orthodox." Douglas Hall asserts that the term has always been highly ambiguous.⁵⁵ Furthermore, none of the men associated with the term liked the label. As a student of Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr, Hall had thought them so different that they seemed to have nothing in common. But as he writes fifty years later with the advantage of hindsight, they do seem to have enough in common to be grouped together as a movement. The differences between the individual theologians should not be minimized. For example, one of the best known is the sharp controversy between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner over the existence of natural theology. Brunner called for a careful definition and investigation of the place of natural theology. Barth replied in uncharacteristic brevity with a thunderous *Nein!*

⁵⁴ Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, 16–17.

⁵⁵ Douglas John Hall, *Remembered Voices: Reclaiming the Legacy of "Neo-Orthodoxy"* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 5–8.

He stated, “A real rejection of natural theology does not differ from its acceptance merely in the way in which No differs from Yes...Really to reject natural theology means to refuse to admit it as a separate problem.”⁵⁶ This difference, like many, has to do with substance, doctrinal content, and method. It is not merely a disagreement about words or about the nuances of the theological system.

Yet the differences, as great as they are, are not important for our purposes nearly as much as the similarities. There are enough shared characteristics to group together, though it will be necessary to write with some generalities. The first characteristic is a renewed understanding of sin. Two World Wars had destroyed most people’s faith in the goodness of man and the inevitability of progress.⁵⁷ Neo-orthodox theologians thought of sin as exchanging theocentric thinking with self-centeredness. This was less an exegetical deduction than the incorporation of Kierkegaard’s concept of anxiety.⁵⁸ Anxiety is the unfocused fear that comes from the knowledge of the freedom to choose. When Adam and Eve chose to eat of the fruit, they became conscious of their sin through their choice. The actual existence of Adam and Eve made little material difference to the story.⁵⁹

A second characteristic is the acceptance of historical critical methods of interpreting the Bible.⁶⁰ Neo-orthodoxy did not abandon the methodology developed by the history of religions school and continued to be refined. Brunner and Niebuhr characterize Genesis 3 as myth.⁶¹ The Gospel of John was a novel

⁵⁶ Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology: Comprising “Nature and Grace” by Emil Brunner and the Reply “No!” By Karl Barth*, trans. Peter Fraenkel (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 75.

⁵⁷ For a collection of testimonies about the collapse of Liberal optimism, see William Allen Silva, “The Expression of Neo-Orthodoxy in American Protestantism, 1939-1960” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University, 1988), 38–49.

⁵⁸ Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Neo-Orthodoxy: An Evangelical Evaluation of Barthianism* (Chicago: Moody, 1956), 38–39.

⁵⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concept of Dread*, trans. Walter Lowrie, 3rd ed. (Princeton, 1957), 42–45.

⁶⁰ Silva, “Expression of Neo-Orthodoxy,” 14.

⁶¹ Ryrie, *Neo-Orthodoxy*.

written by a trembling old man, and the pastoral epistles were not written by Paul.⁶² It was possible to adopt this view without also adopting classic Liberalism's reductionistic naturalism because the historical facticity of the Scriptures made little difference. Whether or not the tomb is actually empty, the doctrine of the resurrection shows that the opposition between man and God is overcome. The story of Adam and Eve, though myth, is the story of all of us: a true account of the presence of sin in man.⁶³

A third characteristic is a new view of revelation. Where Liberalism explained everything by naturalistic processes from an implicit faith in science to uncover the truth, Neo-orthodoxy in contrast preached that God had revealed himself in Christ. God's supernatural breaking into history was celebrated and emphasized instead of being explained away as imagination. Walter Horton shows how deeply he was influenced by Neo-orthodoxy when he writes: "my own center of confidence and hope has passed from science to revelation, from human discovery to divine guidance ... I look for concrete light and guidance ... to the biblical revelation of God."⁶⁴ Neo-orthodox theologians differed in how much credence should be given to natural revelation, but they saw the primary source of revelation as being Christ.⁶⁵

A fourth characteristic is a new view of the Bible, a different one from both Liberalism and Fundamentalism. For Liberals, the tools of higher criticism were there to sort out what really happened and what did not. Once they had reconstructed the actual events or original doctrines, they could reformulate Christian doctrine to more accurately fit the truth. For Fundamentalists, the Bible is the inerrant Word of God. It carries the inherent authority of God himself. Our understanding of it

⁶² Ibid., 35, 45.

⁶³ Ibid., 41, 30.

⁶⁴ Walter Marshall Horton, "Between Liberalism and the New Orthodoxy," *The Christian Century* 56 (May 17, 1939): 639. Horton disagreed with "Barthianism," but the influence of Neo-orthodoxy is quite plain, and his own pilgrimage is an excellent statement of the shift from science to revelation.

⁶⁵ Ryrie, *Neo-Orthodoxy*, 34–35.

can be mistaken, but it cannot. Real understanding is both possible and obligatory, as is the necessity of application to contemporary life. Neo-orthodox theologians criticized both perspectives. The tools of higher criticism were useful for getting beyond the bare facts, for what really happened was not that important. Since they believed that the Bible is not inerrant, to confess inerrancy was to make an unacceptable sacrifice of the intellect. It is a matter of consistency that an errant word is therefore a human production. As stated above, the primary revelation of God is in Jesus Christ. That is the divine Word. The Scriptures are a human word about the Word of God, and as such it is a witness to the Word of God. The Bible becomes the Word of God when God uses it to overpower us. When people encounter Christ in the Scriptures by faith, the Bible becomes the Word of God for them. Therefore, the authority of the Bible is an instrumental authority, not an inherent authority. When God uses the Bible to reveal Christ, it is that encounter that is authoritative.

The final characteristic that we will discuss here is a strong christological focus. Whereas Liberalism had an anthropological focus, Neo-orthodoxy made Christ the center of their theology.⁶⁶ Yet the life of Jesus of Nazareth held little importance. Many of the stories were not authentic, and the little information that did exist showed Jesus to be little different than other religious founders. It was in the cross that the significance of Christ was to be found. In the cross God revealed that the things of this world are vain and doomed. In the cross God revealed the sign of the election of all life.⁶⁷

This survey of Neo-orthodoxy has necessarily omitted many details. No mention has been made of their unique views of eschatology; of the transcendence of God; of their interest in the reformers; of their ecumenical stance. Little time was spent on Niebuhr's social consciousness, Barth's sovereignty of God, Brunner's view of human nature. Tillich's philosophical intricacies need not detain us. It will not be necessary provide a critical response, as this has been done ably elsewhere. Suffice

⁶⁶ Hall, *Remembered Voices*, 128.

⁶⁷ Ryrie, *Neo-Orthodoxy*, 35–36.

to say that these five characteristics are those that most concern the Biblical Theology Movement.

IV. The Characteristics of the Biblical Theology Movement

If a movement is to be described, it is necessary that there be enough common characteristics that the adherents can be reasonably grouped together. This does not mean that there may not be significant differences between them. In the case of the Biblical Theology Movement, despite many identifiable distinctions, enough things in common remain that the movement may be profitably described as a whole. The following characteristics sketch these common elements.

A. The Restoration of a Biblical Emphasis on Theology

There was a sense that the earlier generation of scholars had so focused on the evolutionary development of religious ideas that the central theological message of the Bible had been lost. In the inaugural editorial of *Theology Today*, the editors establish their purpose for the magazine as being “to contribute to the restoration of theology in the world of today as the supreme science, of which both religion and culture stand in need for their renewal.” Another purpose was “to study the central realities of Christian faith and life, and to set forth their meaning in clear and appropriate language.” They lament the lack of conviction in those who are neither Fundamentalists nor Liberals, and that modern society has replaced theology as “the queen of the sciences” with religious fads. All problems are ultimately theological difficulties, so a revived concern for Christ himself as the truth is the key to purifying mankind’s literary production.⁶⁸

The theological message of the Bible was a non-propositional sense of mystery behind the literal words. Smart claims that in the history of biblical interpretation the church repeatedly lost

⁶⁸ John Alexander Mackay, “Our Aims, and the Present Number,” *Theology Today* 1, no. 1 (April 1944): 4–7.

the meaning of the Scriptures even while cherishing it and studying it intensely. Then the key to understanding is found again and the Bible transforms the church again. The rabbis built a system on the law of God but forgot the prophetic vision of God himself. In the Middle Ages the Bible was studied with care, but the allegorical interpretation robbed it of the freedom to criticize the established order. The heirs of the Reformation buried the Scripture under an overemphasis on its divinity. Nineteenth century scholarship so emphasized the human character of the Scriptures that it ceased to be a word from God. This mysterious quality that requires constant rediscovery points to its hidden center. The Scriptures alone among religious literature embodies the revelation of God to man. Since God can be known only in a partial and broken manner, the Scriptures themselves cannot be reduced to the historical record of Israelite, Jewish, and Christian religions.⁶⁹

For Wright, a theological understanding of the Bible has “little abstract or propositional theology within it.”⁷⁰ It is not a systematically or historically arranged system of ideas, but “an interpretation of history, a confessional recital of historical events as the acts of God ... Consequently, not even the nature of God can be portrayed abstractly. He can only be described in relation to the historical process.”⁷¹ Christ cannot be completely comprehended by an analysis of his life, teachings, or experience as one might with other great religious leaders. Since he was one sent by God, one can only understand him in the light of preceding history.⁷²

The new emphasis on theological understanding was accompanied by a critical attitude toward the previous generation of scholarship. Rowley remarks that with the rise of rationalistic criticism, “to many biblical study became a matter of merely scientific investigation.” Furthermore, the application of

⁶⁹ Smart, *The Interpretation of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 13–19.

⁷⁰ George Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital*, Studies in Biblical Theology 8 (London: SCM, 1969), 55–56.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 57–58.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 60–61.

Darwinian evolutionary principles to the realm of religion “threatened the position of Jesus in the faith of the Church.”⁷³ Jesus became “a mere moment in the religious evolution of man.” Such scholarship “heralded as final truth” conclusions “which have been the product of subjective and a priori reasoning.” These scholars would decide the issue in advance, then “admit only that evidence which is consonant with the prejudged verdict.” A knowledge of the historical context and original language are not adequate in themselves. The authors of the editorial of *Interpretation* write: “We have not entered the temple of Holy Scripture, therefore, when the critical process has done its work. We have merely stood at the door and looked in.”⁷⁴

Wright complains that

discussions of biblical religion had largely become histories of the development of ideas ... The concentration on the minutiae of sources and documents seemed to destroy the unity of the Bible ... Biblical criticism, accommodating itself so largely to the presuppositions of the liberal idealism of the last century, *has* destroyed a great deal of the Bible’s authority. Scripture is no longer determinative as the source of Christian theology.⁷⁵

Yet despite this criticism, the historical critical methods were still deemed valid. Nineteenth century criticism made it possible to expound the Scriptures with more clarity, while freeing them from the dead weight of dogmatic exegesis.⁷⁶ The new change in biblical criticism seeks to conserve all that is of worth, but desires to transcend them. Second Isaiah is accepted, as is the minimal involvement of Moses in the Pentateuch. But it seeks to go beyond the human element to understand the abiding

⁷³ H. H. Rowley, *The Relevance of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), 13–14.

⁷⁴ Editorial, “Criticism, and Beyond,” *Interpretation* 1, no. 2 (April 1947): 223–224.

⁷⁵ Wright, “The Christian Interpreter as Biblical Critic: The Relevance of Valid Criticism,” *Interpretation* 1, no. 2 (April 1947): 140.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

significance of the Bible for the present generation.⁷⁷ According to Wright, “Because of the very nature of Scripture, therefore, we [not] only have the freedom and the right to use literary and historical criticism; we are impelled to employ it.” This includes the process of transmission and the occasion of its composition.⁷⁸

But their criticism of old Liberal theology should not be thought as a return to traditional orthodoxy. Conservatives are lambasted as those “who have an emotional obsession against all higher criticism.”⁷⁹ Indeed, the conservative position is still given the misleading label “bibliolatry” because “intellectual integrity and the Bible itself demand that the rights of biblical criticism be safeguarded, and authenticated facts regarding the history and literary composition of the biblical records be joyfully accepted.”⁸⁰ Wright is even stronger when he writes that

a relatively static authoritarianism, of the Roman Catholic, Fundamentalist, or any other type, so confuses the authority of the Church and its creeds with the authority of the biblical faith that the tension which God places between himself and our human understanding is removed. Certainly, the removal of this tension is the first step in opening the doors of the Church to idolatry.⁸¹

B. The Unity of the Bible in spite of the Historical Critical Method

A second characteristic of the Biblical Theology Movement was an emphasis on the unity of the Bible. This emphasis produced several works dealing with both Testaments.⁸² They were critical of the previous generation’s fragmentation of the

⁷⁷ Rowley, “The Relevance of Biblical Interpretation,” *Interpretation* 1, no. 1 (January 1947): 15.

⁷⁸ Wright, “Christian Interpreter as Biblical Critic,” 148.

⁷⁹ Editorial, “Criticism, and Beyond,” 220.

⁸⁰ Mackay, “Our Aims, and the Present Number,” 7.

⁸¹ Wright, *God Who Acts*, 109.

⁸² Rowley, *Relevance of the Bible*; Paul S. Minear, *Eyes of Faith: A Study in the Biblical Point of View* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1946); Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950).

Bible into a bewildering multitude of sources on the basis of minute and subjective criteria to the exclusion of all other matters.⁸³ Therefore they sought some fundamental unity that could absorb a diversity of sources and theological perspectives without abandoning historical critical methods. Some solutions were rejected from the outset. An allegorical interpretation “is to abandon a historical sense and to open the door to undisciplined fancy; and on such principles any text may be made to mean anything we please.”⁸⁴ It disrespects the Bible and attaches divine authority to what we read into the text rather than the text itself.⁸⁵ Allegory was even charged with anti-Semitic motivations.⁸⁶ There was disagreement on the validity of typology. Florovsky distinguishes typology from allegory—the latter is a method of exegesis; the former, an interpretation of events. Typology implies history and looks for the inner correspondence of the events themselves. Paul’s allegory of Sarah and Hagar is typology under a different name.⁸⁷ On the other hand, Smart is as eager to dismiss typology as he is allegory. Some “patterns of correspondence” are the repeated partial fulfillment of God’s promises that are later again fulfilled partially, not typology. Whenever a prophet drew his imagery of new deliverances or judgments from older ones, a similarity is inevitable. Because the New Testament arose out of the thought-forms of the Old, the language of the New is colored by the Old. This too is not typology. When the historical meaning of a text is made clear by later history, this is a historical/theological interpretation, not a typological one. The New Testament can be regarded as a final reinterpretation of older traditions, which is equally not

⁸³ Wright, “Christian Interpreter as Biblical Critic,” 139–140.

⁸⁴ Rowley, *The Unity of the Bible* (London: Morrison and Gibb Limited, 1953), 18.

⁸⁵ Rowley, “Relevance of Biblical Interpretation,” 5.

⁸⁶ Filson is discussing allegory prior to the end of World War II, when anti-Semitism was unfortunately not as unacceptable as it is today. Even so, this is still a devastating criticism. See Floyd Vivian Filson, “Unity of Old and New Testaments,” *Interpretation* 5, no. 2 (April 1951): 140–141.

⁸⁷ Georges Florovsky, “Revelation and Interpretation,” in *Biblical Authority for Today*, ed. Alan Richardson and Wolfgang Schweitzer (London: SCM, 1951), 175.

typology. Thus, Smart wishes to discard the term “typology” altogether.⁸⁸

The most common positive description of the unity of the Scriptures was “unity in diversity.”⁸⁹ This diversity is not merely differences in time, authorship, and literary form. It extends to differences in spiritual value and in the message itself.⁹⁰ This emphasis allowed them to keep the historical critical methods of the previous generation.⁹¹ Yet the positive model for this unity varied significantly. For Rowley, the unity of Scripture was due to the one God revealing himself to men in history. The men to whom God revealed himself had varying degrees of spiritual capacity to receive the revelation. The Bible was the human, fallible record of this revelation. Because of their limited capacity, they may have incorporated false ideas about God or about ethical standards, to say nothing of historical or scientific data.⁹²

James Muilenburg has three categories of biblical unity. First, the purpose of God unifies the Bible from beginning to end. At the beginning God makes his will known and at the end he brings his will to completion. Second, the Bible is unified by God’s covenant relation with his people. This is how Israel understood the meaning of her existence; it is the proper framework for understanding the law; it is the matrix in which the future is anticipated by a waiting community; it is in the covenant relationship that Israel confesses her sovereign Lord and Christians recognize the Messiah. Third, there is a continuity of divine revelation. Throughout history there have been a succession of theophanies.⁹³ Robert Dentan’s article focuses mainly on the unity of the Old Testament, though he ties it to the New Testament in the conclusion. He matches the three broadest genres of the Old Testament—history, prophecy, and wisdom

⁸⁸ Smart, *Interpretation of Scripture*, 102–120.

⁸⁹ Rowley, *Unity of the Bible*, 1–29.

⁹⁰ Rowley, *Unity of the Bible*, 4, 6; James Muilenburg, “The Interpretation of the Bible,” in *Biblical Authority for Today*, 198–199.

⁹¹ Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, 38.

⁹² Rowley, *Unity of the Bible*, 7–16.

⁹³ Muilenburg, “Interpretation of the Bible,” 200–208.

literature—with three historical periods—prehistory to the mid-8th century BC, mid-8th century to roughly the exile, and from the exile to about the Christian era. In the first period Israel celebrates her covenant relationship. In the second, the prophets bemoan the immaturity and failed potential of this once great nation. In the third, the wisdom literature seeks to develop standards for individuals within the community. For the Christian, there is a higher unity that connects the Old and New Testament. The Old Testament has a sense of incompleteness that for the Christian is resolved in the New Testament. The church is the new and spiritual Israel.⁹⁴

C. The Revelation of God in History instead of in the Bible

The heart of the Biblical Theology Movement was a fairly Barthian conception of the way God revealed Himself in history. Revelation was the event of God's self-disclosure to the prophets and apostles. Propositions were secondary to the experiential encounter with God. This idea of revelation was critical to their goal of carving out a middle ground between Fundamentalism and classic Liberalism. The enscripturation of the divine disclosure was a purely human process as the prophets struggled to understand and communicate the awesome reality that they had experienced. Therefore, the Scriptures could contain errors because the prophets were not carried along by the Spirit as they wrote. Yet neither was the Scripture an entirely naturalistic human search for the divine. The prophets did not create their ideas out of whole cloth, but rather they had a genuinely supernatural experience of God. This conception also avoided the fragmentation associated with the search for sources and redactions. The one history of God's revelation unites the different sources and editors and connects the ancient past with our modern present.⁹⁵

Yet though there was widespread agreement that God had revealed himself in history, the explanation of the details varied.

⁹⁴ Robert Claude Dentan, "The Unity of the Old Testament," *Interpretation* 5, no. 2 (April 1951): 153–173.

⁹⁵ Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, 39–41.

For H. H. Rowley, the Bible is grounded in historical events, but the authority of the Bible is only found when one incorporates the significance of these concrete facts into the sense.⁹⁶ Since he believes that the Bible includes “false presuppositions” and “limited outlooks,” this sorting process is a prerequisite to properly understanding what the Bible reveals about God. The concept of development in revelation is acceptable as long as God is not eliminated from the story.⁹⁷

For Wright, God has revealed himself primarily in the objective events of Israel’s history. From this primary assumption it was inferred that God had chosen his people, which inference was then used to further interpret Israel’s history. This special relationship with God was described as a covenant. In the New Testament the primary event to be explained was the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The NT writers recognized that Jesus was the climax of God’s redemptive purpose, so explained the Christ-event using typology. So also, the church was understood typologically as a parallel to the congregation of Israel. Modern interpreters should not invent additional types because of the danger of falling into allegory.⁹⁸

As a transplanted European Scholar, Otto Piper borrowed heavily from the *heilsgeschichtliche Schule*. He believes that within “the historical life of mankind there is a special process of ‘holy history’ going on and converging toward us.” History is “a continuous process in time with a purpose, a goal, and an intrinsic dynamic that transcends the activities of the individual agents.” Thus, what makes the “holy history” different from regular history is the intrinsic dynamic produced by the “presence of the ever coming God.”⁹⁹

H. Richard Niebuhr distinguishes “outer history” from “inner history.” Outer history is “the succession of events which an uninterested spectator can see from the outside.” Inner history is

⁹⁶ Rowley, “Relevance of Biblical Interpretation,” 8.

⁹⁷ Rowley, *Unity of the Bible*, 15–16.

⁹⁸ Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital*, 50–56, 59–66.

⁹⁹ Otto Alfred Piper, “What the Bible Means to Me 4: The Bible as ‘Holy History,’” *The Christian Century* 63, no. 12 (March 20, 1946): 362–363.

“our own history,” the same events as viewed by the participants in the story. Outer history considers the effects of the event most important; inner history values its worth to us. Outer history views time quantitatively, as a series of events. Inner history views time as duration, as a stream of consciousness from our remembered past to the anticipated future. It is to think of history as a poet instead of a scientist.¹⁰⁰

C. The Unique Hebrew Mentality of the Bible

Scholars of the Biblical Theology Movement recognized from the beginning that the Bible had a unique perspective. To force the text into a framework of evolutionary progress was to impose alien categories on the Bible. If the Bible was to be understood at all, it must be understood in its own categories.¹⁰¹ It possessed a uniquely historical perspective in contrast to the surrounding polytheistic neighbors. Quickly the difference became associated with Hebrew versus Greek mindset. Greek thinking was abstract, propositional, and theoretical. Hebraistic thinking was historical, concrete, and practical.¹⁰² The variation in this thinking was thought to be demonstrated in the linguistic peculiarities of the languages themselves, as Brunner remarks: “The decisive word-form in the language of the Bible is not the substantive, as in Greek, but the verb, the word of action. The thought of the Bible is not substantival, neuter and abstract, but verbal, historical, and personal.”¹⁰³ Numerous studies fleshed out the claim that a difference in thinking stemmed from a difference in languages. It should be added, however, that the New Testament was thought to share the same perspective as the Old, despite being written in Greek.¹⁰⁴ The explanation for this was that Semitic thought-forms underlay both Testaments. Aubrey Johnson sought to demonstrated from the shift between singular

¹⁰⁰ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, (New York: Macmillan Co., 1941), 59–72.

¹⁰¹ Muilenburg, “Interpretation of the Bible,” 199–200.

¹⁰² Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital*, 33–46; Piper, “What the Bible Means to Me 4,” 362.

¹⁰³ Emil Brunner, *Truth as Encounter*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 47.

¹⁰⁴ Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, 45.

and plural when describing a group, or the identity between a person and his emissary, that in the Israelite perspective the community can be conceived as a singular identity, and in turn the community was bound up in the individual.¹⁰⁵ Thorleif Boman makes a system out of doing word studies to establish a difference between Greek and Hebrew thinking. The Greek experienced the world by composed reflection; the Hebrew by ceaseless movement, emotion, and life. Visual space was the thought-form of the Greek; for the Hebrew it was time. For the Hebrew the word was the reality; for the Greek it was the thing.¹⁰⁶ These assertions are established by detailed lexical studies. For example, he observes that הָיָה can mean either "be" or "become" and from this he draws the conclusion that "the person is an active being who is perpetually engaged in becoming and yet remains identical with himself."¹⁰⁷ This work was lauded by George Knight as "seminal in its importance," and "a book not to borrow, but to buy, mark, and inwardly digest."¹⁰⁸

D. The Use of the Surrounding Culture in Unique Ways

Perhaps the least distinctive characteristic of the Biblical Theology Movement is how the Bible used the cultural and religious elements in unique ways. Adherents of this position included classic Liberals, Roman Catholics, and even Jews. The claim was that the Bible did borrow heavily from its

¹⁰⁵ Aubrey R. Johnson, *The One and the Many in the Israelite Conception of God*, 2nd ed. (Cardiff: University of Wales P, 1961).

¹⁰⁶ Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*, The Norton Library (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), 204–207.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 38–49.

¹⁰⁸ George Angus Fulton Knight, "Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek," *Theology Today* 18, no. 2 (July 1961): 254–255. Dentan and Muilenburg register some disagreement, but do not disagree with the main thesis of the book. See Robert C. (Robert Claude) Dentan, "Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek," *Interpretation* 16, no. 2 (April 1962): 205–207; Muilenburg, "Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 17, no. 1 (November 1961): 79–81; Frederick L. Moriarty, "Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (July 1961): 367–370.

environment, yet it combined those elements in unique ways. Both Old and New Testament scholars made this claim. “It is possible to detect the reflection of Egyptian and Mesopotamian beliefs in many episodes of the Old Testament, but the overwhelming impression left by that document is one, not of deviation, but of originality.”¹⁰⁹ “Therefore we can grasp the distinctive character of the New Testament message concerning God only by a clear discernment of the originality of its teachings about Jesus Christ.”¹¹⁰ Wright is a good representation of what these distinctive elements were. Unlike polytheists, God could not be characterized by any single aspect of nature. God’s activity was not mythological, but the direct cause of events in nature and history. God stood alone, with no other being even near his level. No images were appropriate to portray God. To be religious one must also be moral.¹¹¹

V. Evaluation and Aftermath

The Biblical Theology Movement gained doctrinal hegemony for roughly the twenty years following World War II. Its end as a major trend came about as the proposed middle-ground between Fundamentalism and Liberalism proved to be impossible to establish. Some of the characteristics dissolved due to inherent illogicality. Those that were essentially sound lacked a proper foundation for their claims, so were subsequently eclipsed as the theological world of former Liberalism moved on to other concerns.

A. *The Revelation of God in History instead of in the Bible*

The revelation of God in history was inherently problematic from the start, something that became obvious once adherents of the Biblical Theology Movement tried to define the precise

¹⁰⁹ H. Frankfort et al., *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1965), 367.

¹¹⁰ Floyd Vivian Filson, *The New Testament against Its Environment: The Gospel of Christ, the Risen Lord*, Studies in Biblical Theology 3 (London: SCM, 1963), 9.

¹¹¹ Wright, “How Did Early Israel Differ from Her Neighbors?” *The Biblical Archaeologist* 6, no. 1 (February 1943): 1–20.

nature of history. Perhaps the most critical blow to this point was Barr's inaugural address at Princeton Seminary. He points out that Christianity is a historical religion, so history is crucial to its credibility. Yet as a rubric to understand all of Scripture apart from inspiration, the revelation of God in history fails to properly account for everything. First, there are large sections of the Old Testament that cannot be made to fit the concept of revelation through history. An example of this is the wisdom literature. Second, even in texts that do fit, the revelation of God through history is logically impossible. The exodus required God's direct communication to Moses, or it would not have happened at all; yet on this understanding the burning bush would have to be an interpretation of the event by fallible Israel. Third, since the Biblical Theology Movement did not accept the historicity of the entirety of Scripture, they were forced to so broadly define what is "history" that the term loses all meaning. If Noah's flood is legend, while the exile is sober history, how is it possible to lump both together and call it the revelation of God through history?¹¹² Inerrancy would solve this problem immediately by assuming it is all accurately historical. But the adherents of the Biblical Theology Movement had not left themselves that option.

Less influential, but more devastating was the criticism of Langdon Gilkey. He correctly observes that the source of the difficulty was the attempt to bridge two worlds, that of Liberalism on the one hand and orthodoxy on the other. Orthodoxy understood God's acts and speech literally and univocally. He spoke with an audible voice and performed wondrous miracles. Whatever the text claims God did or said, that is what he really did. But Liberalism takes as its starting point a closed universe of cause and effect. Since the supernatural is impossible on this understanding, God's actions or speech were transmitted immanently through the natural order and was accessible to all men. Neo-orthodox and biblical theologians repudiated the reduction of God's activity to general influence and his speech to subjective human insight. Yet they did not repudiate the foundational assertion of a closed universe.

¹¹² Barr, "Revelation Through History in the Old Testament and in Modern Theology," *Interpretation* 17, no. 2 (April 1, 1963): 193–205.

Therefore, the speech or actions of God are understood analogically. “God acts, but not as men act; God speaks, but not with an audible voice.”¹¹³ Yet the concrete events that these actions or speeches are supposed to represent did not happen in the way it was recorded. “It makes us wonder, despite ourselves, what, in fact, do we moderns think God *did* in the centuries preceding the incarnation.”¹¹⁴ Yet strangely the question of what God *really* did is given very little attention except to deny miracles. The exodus was interpreted as a natural but unlikely event that Israel took to be the supernatural hand of God; and from that experience created an entire religion. Gilkey is unusually candid about the drawbacks of trying to hear the voice of God in a closed universe. Yet instead of drawing the conclusion that orthodoxy is correct, he calls for a careful ontology that will put meaning into orthodox language even in a closed universe. He is not able to describe what possible philosophical alchemy could meet these requirements, but he is nevertheless optimistic that it must be possible.¹¹⁵

B. The Unity of the Bible in spite of the Historical Critical Method

Establishing a fundamental unity to the Scriptures was also doomed to failure, because the search for unity conflicted with the underlying naturalistic assumptions of the historical critical method. The only way forward was to reassert the historical critical method and the fragmentation that went along with it. The other alternative, to suspect the historical critical foundation, was never seriously considered. As European and American non-conservative scholars began to make claims for theological disunity, Neo-orthodox and Liberal scholars began to abandon an attempt to find theological unity. Von Rad, ironically enough, was concerned to establish the unity of the Bible. He proposed a revised form of typological exegesis. He argued that there was

¹¹³ Langdon Gilkey, “Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 33, no. 3 (March 1962): 149.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 143–154.

no unifying center to the Old Testament, for amid the various sources one could detect repeated theological reinterpretations of the biblical stories. For example, in the account of the giving of manna, the earlier source saw only the provision of physical food for Israel (Exod 16:1–5; 13b–16a). But the later source saw in this something typical of what repeatedly happens to God’s people (Exod 16:6–13a, 16b–26). Yet it was in this reinterpretation that he found unity.¹¹⁶ However, his proposal was not well received by NT scholars. Conzelmann objected to his ambiguity of theological intention and historical survey.¹¹⁷ Thus von Rad succeeded in steering non-conservative scholars away from the unity of the Bible.

For the New Testament also, non-conservative scholars began to lose interest in establishing the unity of the Bible. Conzelmann’s dissertation made the claim that Luke had a unique theological perspective that can be determined by comparison with Mark. He claimed that as the years lengthened it became clear that Jesus was not returning soon, so Luke sought to establish a theological system that could reconcile a heavenly Jesus and an earthly church for the long-term. He had a unique conception of the church’s mission as part of the plan of God from the beginning.¹¹⁸ Ernst Käsemann claimed that the New Testament exhibited frequent irreconcilable theological contradictions. Therefore “the New Testament canon does not, as such constitute the foundation of the unity of the Church. On the contrary, as such ... it provides the basis for the multiplicity of the confessions.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Gerhard von Rad, “Typologische Auslegung Des Alten Testaments,” *Evangelische Theologie* 12, no. 1–2 (July 1952): 17–33; “Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament,” trans. John Bright, *Interpretation* 15, no. 2 (April 1961): 174–192.

¹¹⁷ Hans Conzelmann, “Fragen an Gerhard von Rad,” *Evangelische Theologie* 24, no. 3 (March 1964): 113–125.

¹¹⁸ Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, trans. Geoffrey Buswell (New York: Harper and Row, 1960).

¹¹⁹ Ernst Käsemann, “The Canon of the New Testament and the Unity of the Church,” in *Essays on New Testament Themes*, Studies in Biblical Theology 41 (London: SCM, 1971), 100, 103.

C. The Unique Hebrew Mentality of the Bible

While not the only one to object, Barr's *The Semantics of Biblical Language* almost singlehandedly demolished the concept of a Hebrew mentality.¹²⁰ He argued that the Hebrew versus Greek idea stemmed from a false view of language supported by a selective and biased use of the evidence. The basic unit of biblical meaning, he points out, is not the word but the sentence. Words come from an established pool of vocabulary to be reused at will; sentences are unique and so can carry unique meaning. Theological statements are capable of translation into other languages and therefore do not require the unique morphological, lexical, and grammatical structures of the Hebrew language in order to be understood. There is no necessary correlation between the number and variety of words for a thing and the depth of thought on that thing by its speakers. The Bible was translated because of its status as a sacred book. Accordingly, the community that translated it will be familiar with it, and they will be culturally distinct from the wider society that speaks the same language. The Biblical Theology Movement was reluctant to accept this because it threatened to fragment the Scriptures and destroy the synthetic method they were using. They also refused to accept this because they wanted to find a higher unity in the Scriptures behind the text rather than at the literary level. Boman is especially attacked for his illogical and unsystematic application of conflicting lexical, grammatical, and morphological data to establish his claims. Even Kittel's mighty TWNT is not exempt from Barr's withering criticism.¹²¹

D. The Use of the Surrounding Culture in Unique Ways

The proper foundation for maintaining the distinctiveness of the Bible to the cultures around it is an unconditional faith-commitment to it as the inerrant revelation of God. It is simple to demonstrate that prophets and apostles wrote from a particular

¹²⁰ For other criticisms of the distinctive Hebrew mentality, see Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, 70–71.

¹²¹ Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford U P, 1961).

historical situatedness. If they were trapped by their limited human perspective, and unable to hear a word from God and transmit it without error, then an attempt to show a contrast will fail. For it will inevitably be shown that they did not write in a vacuum. To the degree they wrote their own interpretations of God's revelation rather than being borne along by the Spirit, to that degree they must have adopted the ideas around them. As mere men where else could they have acquired their ideas? But if it is true that human situatedness does not preclude the overshadowing power of God to speak his word, then even though they were but men, they could write just as they claimed to write—the very word of God. The power of God can so carry them that though they still wrote with their own personalities intact and with their own cultural backgrounds, they nevertheless could write exactly what God desired them to say. God is not limited by human situatedness: he uses it to clearly communicate to people at a specific time and place.

Accordingly, as non-conservative scholars tried to establish a contrast of the Bible without inspiration, they invariably found the project impossible. In the New Testament there was never the clear break with the history of religions school as with the Old Testament. Bultmann and Dodd maintained a sense of historical connectedness in their own differing theological perspectives.¹²² Erwin Goodenough's massive *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* claimed that hellenistic Christianity was not distinct from the Judaism it borrowed from. Judaism of the period was not monolithic; there was a popular, hellenized Judaism in addition to the Rabbinic Judaism.¹²³ In the excitement that followed the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, scholars began to see parallels between the Qumran community and the New Testament.¹²⁴ Frank Cross argued that the worship of Yahweh grew out of the worship of old Northwest Semitic deities.¹²⁵

¹²² Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, 73.

¹²³ Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, 12 vols., Bollingen series 37 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953).

¹²⁴ Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, 74.

¹²⁵ Frank Moore Cross, "Yahweh and the God of the Patriarchs," *Harvard Theological Review* 55, no. 4 (October 1962): 225–259.

Instead of arguing that Israel took cultural elements and distinctively repurposed them in unique ways, Cross argued that Israel incorporated the mythology of the past and through the process of historical development the old Semitic gods were transformed into Yahweh as we know him today.¹²⁶

E. The Restoration of a Biblical Emphasis on Theology

The attempt of biblical theologians to recover the theological dimension rested on Neo-orthodox theology. Yet that system is inherently illogical, for it attempts to hear a genuine word from God while espousing a worldview where God is unable to speak and act in the way that men speak and act.¹²⁷ Furthermore, the wide variety of theological positions were only united by their opposition to Liberalism. As classic Liberalism ceased to be a problem, the apparent theological unity broke up.¹²⁸ Finally, the rise of postmodernism brought an entirely different set of concerns and a new direction for potential threats. Then called “the new hermeneutic,” this movement claimed that both the interpreter and the writer are trapped within their own cultural context and are unable to break out of it to discover objective truth.¹²⁹ Whether scholars adopted the new hermeneutic or attacked it, the Biblical Theology Movement was not equipped to answer it and therefore became outdated.

Conclusion

The Biblical Theology Movement did produce some salutary effects. Its emphasis on orthodox expression made it easier for conservatives to make the claims they did. But it is not enough to have orthodox language. Without a proper foundation, the attempt to reproduce the affective dimension of orthodoxy and its spiritual power was doomed to failure. Scholars in this

¹²⁶ Frank Moore Cross and David Noel Freedman, “The Song of Miriam,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 14, no. 4 (October 1955): 237–250.

¹²⁷ Ryrie, *Neo-Orthodoxy*, 58–62.

¹²⁸ Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, 78.

¹²⁹ Donald A. Carson, “Hermeneutics: A Brief Assessment of Some Recent Trends,” *Themelios* 5, no. 2 (January 1980): 14–16.

movement wanted to move away from the unbridled humanism of classic Liberalism. But their allegiance to historical critical methodology shackled them to a worldview that does not make it possible to hear an unambiguous word from God or to affirm the miracles essential to the very foundation of the Christian worldview. They were adamant that a return to Fundamentalism was not possible or desirable. Therefore, when cracks began to emerge in the theological edifice they had built, the only way forward was a return to some of the naturalistic and ahistorical claims they had sought to circumvent. The leading lights of the movement did not abandon their position in the 1960s, but they acquired few new disciples. Some scholars sought to further the idea with some modification. The most notable example of this is Brevard Childs. His canonical approach sought to use the canon of Scripture as the unifying theological center. He too had few disciples despite being a world-renown OT scholar. The despised Fundamentalists, that non-conservatives were so sure were boxing themselves into anti-intellectual irrelevancy, thrived and grew into the formidable evangelical movement we know today. The heirs of classic Liberalism, despite their constant attempts to innovate the message of the gospel itself, have been gradually fading into irrelevancy, even though they still retain the keys of academic power.