

THEOLOGY AND THE GOSPEL PREACHER

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The early volumes of Alexander Campbell's *Millennial Harbinger* show that Campbell was struggling to establish a consistent theology, and perhaps his *Christian System*, is one result of that effort. But few early "restoration" preachers had time or inclination for such, nor have gospel preachers to this day been "theologians" in the classic sense of the word. We read the Bible, and try to follow Bible examples of teaching and practice, without giving much thought to the philosophy back of our actions. Perhaps there is a "philosophy" in this, and a very good one. We trust the Holy Spirit to set forth truth in such a way as to lead us aright, and do not feel the need to explain the whys and wherefores of the scheme of redemption; nor to fit it into a neat package of creedal items: one, two, three—with conditional clauses and footnotes. Let God have His reasons, and let the Holy Spirit organize and reveal the result. We will read and present it, confident that a "thus saith the Lord" is enough.

Too, our experience with Theologians, and Theological Seminaries, has not encouraged their use. We have seen some good Bible believing, Bible preaching men go into these schools for their Ph.D., or D.D. degrees, and come out so filled with pride and "over-our-head" terminology; or so carried away with human philosophy; that they were no longer useful in the saving of souls. We also know of men who were captured by the system (usually Calvinistic), without realizing how extensively the acceptance of a few basic errors would affect the remainder of their studies. But in such warnings against the dangers of human systems, there is also a recognition of our need to understand them so that we can reduce them to an "every-man" level, and refute them by sound Bible teaching.

Our lack of theological acumen has also made us vulnerable to fundamental errors in the commentaries and critical studies we read. Although I have no statistics on the matter, my forty years of looking at preachers libraries convinces me that perhaps 80% of the commentaries and study books we use come from men with a Calvinistic background. In recent years some discount Book Houses have made a studied effort to place such material in preachers libraries. For a time they financed this effort as an evangelistic program, thus cutting the price of the books so preachers would buy them. I have seen Calvin's *Institutes*, Hodge's *Systematic Theology*, *Luther on Free Will*, and many other like works in the libraries of young, inexperienced preachers—because they were "cheap". I am not suggesting a censorship; but someone needs to warn our non-theological brethren that they are nibbling at and swallowing something that has a hook.

Practically all of the early "restoration" preachers had a Calvinistic background—coming from Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist churches. When they recognized the Bible principle of the "call of the gospel (as opposed to direct operation of the Holy

Spirit, to give faith), they were accused of denying that the Holy Spirit operated at all. Campbell was called Arian (denying the eternal nature of Christ), Socinian (offering rationalistic explanations of sin and salvation), Pelagian (denying total depravity, and by a probable perversion, saying man could save himself), and so, on and on. People thought in terms of “systems” then, and when one broke with Calvinistic principles (often called “evangelical”) they tried to find his “theology” in some other “system”. As we have said, these early preachers had cut loose from systems and were operating on a simple, trusting plan of Bible sufficiency. But reaction to emotional “evangelical” concepts of conversion sometimes led them to seem cold and legalistic. The past century of conflict with Baptist debaters, miracle workers, etc., has developed generations of “gospel plan” preachers, deeply suspicious of “love...grace...justification by faith” and like expressions. They freely acknowledge a legitimate place for all these, but do not trust others to put them in their place. I must admit that I belong to one of those suspicious generations. Sometimes even scriptural terminology (because often misused) was regarded as “Ashdodic”.

Current Implications

Then, institutional “issues” set brethren who really cared, to thinking for themselves. Political and social upheavals against “the establishment” had its counterpart in religion. Many recognized that “Church of Christ-ism” was taking the place of conversion to Christ, and traditional practices had pushed aside true spiritual worship. It was a time for re-study, re-evaluation. I did my re-studying in 1948-49, thrashing out the course to take in the impending institutional problems. Not content with a re-study of the organization of the church, I also studied anew the whole scheme of redemption, the church, etc. A chart worked out then, to teach the difference in the system of law or works, and the system of faith, I still use today. Perhaps I was blessed in that earlier debates with Calvinists served to balance my conclusions-for today preachers draw conclusions on Adamic sin, grace, work of the Holy Spirit, etc., with no apparent conception of where logical progression of these ideas will take them. All of which is a round-about way of saying that I have been asked to review a book (*The Way of Salvation*, by K. C. Moser; Gospel Light Publ., Co., Delight, Ark.) which many think is adding Calvinistic fuel to current discussions of these matters. The book was first published by the Gospel Advocate in 1932. It was given endorsement by the late Cled. E. Wallace as “provocative of serious thought,” although bro. Wallace said, “It is not necessary that the reader of a book agree with its author in all points, either to enjoy it or be stimulated by it.” He mentions “some mooted questions” discussed, specifying the relation existing between faith and repentance, the justification of Abraham and the personal indwelling of the Holy Spirit. G. C. Brewer reviewed the book (in May, 1933) in a far less cautious manner. He said,

“every reader...should order a copy...and read it two or three times. It will enlarge his vision and refresh his soul. I commend the book heartily. If there is a conclusion in it with which I differ, I do not now recall it.”

But one of the best Bible scholars of his time, brother Robertson L. Whiteside, saw much more clearly the direction and consequences of brother Moser’s book. In his *Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Saints at Rome*, he specifically cites Moser’s book (page 92), and quotes (without specific citation) many passages from the book, pointing out what he conceives to be its errors. Whiteside evidently felt (and so do I) that Moser had adopted some of the basic fallacies of human theology, and had allowed them to color his conclusions. For example, he quotes Moser, then says, “Surely the author did not properly consider the import of his words. If a Universalist or an Ultra-Calvinist had penned such words, we would not be surprised.” This, with other cross-references showing Whiteside’s evaluation of Moser’s “theology” follows: *Whiteside on Romans*, p. 91, refers to Moser, *Way of Salvation*, p. 119; *Romans*, p. 2, refers to the book by name; *R.*, p. 93, to *Way*, p. 115; *R.*, p. 96, to *Way*, p. 53-f; *R.*, p. 98, to *Way*, p. 118; *R.*, p. 110, to *Way*, p. 46-f. It is interesting to note that bros. C. R. Nichol, Foy E. Wallace, Jr., and Cled E. Wallace joined in writing the introduction, and in commending brother Whiteside’s book. As such distinguished Bible scholars have commented on brother Moser’s book it seems a bit presumptuous for me to attempt the same. However times have changed, and the new Calvinism of our day is a much greater threat to our brethren than were the same ideas forty years ago. Brother Moser’s book is used in some of the Preacher Training Schools of our land, and the Grace-Fellowship discussions among conservative preachers have renewed attention to some of the principles discussed in the book. I do not intend to examine the book, point by point, but plan to write some articles on subjects covered there, and will make reference to many of bro. Moser’s statements. It is my hope and intention that this may be an objective profitable study—suited to the needs of our day; and I want to thank VANGUARD for making space available for my comments.

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