

THE FAITH ONCE DELIVERED??

A review of Christian Doctrine "The Faith Once Delivered" William J. Richardson, General Editor Standard Publishing, 1983

By Roger R. Chambers

The churches have received a packet from the North American Christian Convention promoting the March Open Forum on The Future of the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ. Standard Publishing financed the mailing. Underlying and motivating all this so-called openness is a not-too-well-disguised agenda: (1) Identify and Invest our natural leaders, (2) declare the NACC our denominational representative, (3) redefine Restoration toward ecumenism, and (4) update our doctrine toward Tübingen. All this is to be done, of course, in the name of unity and evangelism.

Two books have been put forward to rebuke and redirect the movement. The first is Leroy Garrett's The Stone-Campbell Movement (College Press, 1981), a well-written piece of manufactured history. The burden of SCM is that there never should have been a Restoration Movement, and wouldn't have been except for the sectarian arrogance of second and third generation restorationists. The true Stone-Campbell tradition, says Garrett, was Intended to be an advanced phase of the 16th-century Protestant Reformation. The author says that it's time for us to come to ourselves and get on with unity based, not on doctrine, but on the Lordship of Jesus.

The second book is Standard's Christian Doctrine. The Forum packet includes a flier advertising--nay, extolling--Christian Doctrine. It is important to notice that a mailing designed to encourage proper congregational representation at the St. Louis gathering should contain a book advertisement at all. It's out of place; unless, of course, the publishers are convinced that the Forum requires what the book has to offer. Which is exactly the case. In preparation for St. Louis, Mr. Small wants every preacher to lead his elders in a series of studies in this "one of the most significant works we have produced." To what end? "A broadened perspective." I shouldn't have to translate that one.

Christian Doctrine has some good stuff; in particular, David Root's chapter "God the Father," Edwin S. Nelson's "The Way of Salvation," and James Van Buren's "The Christian Life." These offerings are superior; other chapters carry material that is more than worthwhile.

In one of the packet's essays, Susan Higgins assures us that "Our strong claim to the authoritativeness (authority?) of Scripture preserved us from succumbing to the theological "liberal drift" of the 19th and early 20th centuries. . ." (parenthesis mine). I have in my office thick folders of proof that this is not true; Christian Doctrine is further evidence. In at least ten of its eighteen chapters, the book is written from an unacceptably low view of Inspiration. And one's view of inspiration ultimately and inevitably decides the content and character of the faith he holds, and passes on to the next generation. In the aforementioned chapters the writers operate from the Neo-orthodox paradigm of inspiration and revelation. And the reader is not given an index of Tübingenese, i.e., a Neo-orthodox code book to let him in on what the authors are really getting at. Much of Christian Doctrine is written with studied ambiguity, just like some of the essays in the packet.

Editor Richardson charts the philosophical course for Christian Doctrine in the preface: "The Christian faith is not primarily an affirmation of doctrine, but rather a confession of Jesus as Lord." Sounds nice. Until you remember that the idea that Jesus is Lord is doctrine. A first-step in Neo-orthodoxy is to separate Jesus from doctrine; the idea is to make faith personal, rather than propositional. It leads to Calvinism and faith-as-experience or to Neo-orthodoxy and faith-as-existential-encounter.

In Chapter One, Richardson subscribes the Gospel vs. Doctrine dichotomy. He resurrects the C. H. Dodd (The Apostolic Preaching, 1936) thesis of an essential distinction between preaching (Jesus/gospel) and teaching (doctrine). Dodd has long-since been discredited in this (see Robert C. Worley, Preaching and Teaching in the Earliest Church, Westminster, 1967). You don't have to read Worley; just get out your concordance and trace the words in the New Testament. C. H. Dodd was a leading exponent of subjective authority. He used his Jesus/Doctrine dichotomy to claim devotion to Jesus while he denied basic Bible doctrine. Incredibly, Editor Richardson permits Leroy Garrett, in Chapter Three, to give a second extended presentation of Dodd's theory. Garrett, predictably, decides that doctrine (such as baptism) plays second fiddle to Gospel, and must therefore be set aside on behalf of unity.

Here I presume to supply a code book for some of the chapters in Christian Doctrine. Neo-orthodoxy is a synthetic approach to faith; it is an attempt by made-in-Germany theology to retrieve something of a belief in Jesus from the devastation of 19th-century classical liberalism, without committing to a belief in the factual truth and binding authority of the Bible. The scheme: redesign the doctrine of Inspiration, creating new categories, new distinctions, and a new vocabulary to support them. Redefine revelation to mean a personal confrontation between God and man now-and-again in history; call this an event. Make a fundamental distinction between Scripture and revelation, then identify Scripture as a not-necessarily-accurate human witness to these "revelatory events." Reduce inspiration to a not-quite-definable, nonspecific, act of God in presiding loose over the process of recording the witness (a view touching the autographs). Identify Word of God primarily with the event, secondarily with the witness (Scripture). Doctrines become nonessential formulations of human thought. Revelation is imperfectly reflected in the Bible and is directly available only in the historical events, of which Scripture bears witness. The historian, therefore, is the final arbiter of the Faith. In the case of the Church, the scholar is assigned the job of examining the history of the first-century Church ("study Christian origins") in order to discover the normative (favorite word) form of Christianity.

Fred P. Thompson, Jr. writes the key chapter "The Word of God." He is effusive--poetic even--in his praise of Scripture. Despite the rhetorical elegance, "The Word of God" is not written from a belief in verbal inspiration and inerrancy. It is not true that Brother Thompson is to be identified with the godfathers of Neo-orthodoxy in his conclusions; he believes what they deny. But he accepts the Neo-orthodox categories in the matter of inspiration. And this must lead--and is leading--to a progressively low view of Scripture. One generation adopts the methodology of Barth, Küng, & Co.; the next generation accepts their conclusions. It is inevitable. The road to Tübingen leads to Tübingen.

With the above guide to the code in mind, read Thompson. He offers an inaccurate discourse on the philosophy of language that undermines confidence in Scripture simply because it is the Word of God in writing. Check his categories. Under revelation: event, message, disclosure, Word of God, confront, phenomena. Under Scripture: witness, description, interpretation, recital, literary deposit of the testimony. Thompson says that "God inspired (breathed on) men through the Holy Spirit to proclaim and preserve His word" (parenthesis his). Is there a difference between the Spirit specifically breathing Scripture (II Tim. 3:16) and His breathing on men who wrote? Yes. All the difference in the world--if you know what lies behind the language. Thompson says good things about the importance of historical context as it informs hermeneutics, but he intertwines this principle with that of historical criticism (a negative process) of the text, which is not the same thing at all.

Brother Thompson struggles to affirm the Bible as divine revelation without committing to a belief in factual trustworthiness in all its parts, to kindly accuse the Bible of falsehood and still use it as a credible witness, to use the Bible to condemn the errors of man while allowing man to judge the errors of the Bible.

Space does not permit a discussion of all the fatal errors in the neo-orthodox paradigm. It is fundamentally subjective. While we, of course, cannot speak of revelation apart from history, historical events, per se, are not revelation. In many cases, the only event is the act of the Holy Spirit directly giving the writer of Scripture the words to be put on paper. Nonverbal events are unexplicit; there is no special revelation until another equally supernatural event takes place: the Spirit-directed record and interpretation. Ultimately, therefore, the written Word is the revelation, not the event. Scripture is the once-for-all telling of the mind of God to man; finality rests there, not in historiography. Neo-orthodoxy sets up the irrational dichotomy between historical and theological truth. In this system, historical statements of the Bible need not be entirely true to support true theology. Falsehood and truth have equal value. But if God can reveal Himself through false propositions just as well as through true ones, we can never be sure that what God tells us is true.

In Chapter Four, "The Nature of Biblical Faith," Leroy Garrett combines the Calvinian theory of infused faith with Karl Barth's concept of existential faith (a historical connection). He assumes Calvin's doctrine of Illumination. Then Garrett makes the standard Neo-orthodox distinction between faith in Christ and faith-as-response-to-doctrine. Exactly what is the reader supposed to do with this piece of confusion?

Robert Hull views the Old Testament as "an essential witness . . . to the revelation of God." Ronald Heine, writing on the life of Jesus, favors the source-hypothesis with its assumption of Markan priority. Burton B. Thurston uses the negative historical-critical method freely; it leads him to such speculative theories as the one that has John selecting the miracle at Cana for its symbolic value.

In the all-important chapter on Salvation, Ron Durham uses standard Neo-orthodox jargon. He inaccurately identifies the penal substitution concept of Atonement with Anselm's Satisfaction theory. Durham writes that "the Bible itself does not present a systematic doctrine of atonement." I guess Brother Durham hasn't had time to get to the Book of Romans. He seems to find the idea of salvation from the wrath of God distasteful to the modern mind; this gives him no right to ignore the clear teaching of Scripture on the subject.

In his discussion of the Church, Robert Fife stands in the shadow of Hans Küng, i.e., the Spirit directly and mystically creates the order of the Body, the New Testament portrays that order, becoming, thereby, "normative" for all time. Brother Fife sets forth the immensely popular theory that unity is a mystical gift to be received, not a human arrangement to be made. He hopes that we will all soon realize this and get on with the business of fellowship and communion with "those who do not share our understandings and concerns." This boils down to unity based on the affirmation of Jesus, not on the terms of salvation in Him.

It is discouraging to find in Christian Doctrine a return to the word Sacrament. It is antisciptural, confusing, and useless. But it has the imprimatur of Tübingen on it, so it must be visited on us in the book.

The footnotes in Christian Doctrine are heavy with Neo-orthodox and Existentialist books. Evangelical scholars are conspicuously absent.

On many of the most vital Biblical issues, Christian Doctrine represents the thinking of a minority within our brotherhood. It seems that Mr. Small intends for the theology therein to become the majority view. If it does, we will pass on to our grandchildren a liberal-ecumenical church.