

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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The Neo-Orthodoxy of Donald Bloesch

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Donald Bloesch is Professor of Systematic Theology Emeritus at Dubuque (Iowa) Theological Seminary. He has written a number of theological books, among which is a two volume work on systematic theology, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*.¹ Dr. Bloesch seems to be orthodox in much of his theology. Paradoxically, however, this is not the case at theology's starting point: the Word of God. Bloesch's errant view of Scripture leaves him without an epistemological foundation upon which to base his theology. Bloesch seriously attempts to find a middle ground between neo-orthodoxy and "right wing" orthodoxy. He claims to have a high view of Scripture. For example, he denounces liberalism and calls for a creedal theology based on Holy Scripture. He also insists on the primacy of Scripture over "religious experiences." And he denies that the Apocrypha and church tradition have an equal standing with the Bible.

Even though Bloesch attempts to distinguish himself from neo-orthodoxy, his writings betray him. The shadow of Karl Barth looms large across the pages of his work. Timothy George is probably correct when he writes that "along with the late Bernard Ramm, Bloesch has probably done more than any other contemporary theologian to revive an interest in Barth among evangelicals."²

Indeed, at times it is hard to distinguish between Bloesch's view of Scripture and that of neo-orthodox theologians. Ronald Nash writes: "For Bloesch, the Bible is the Word of God only in an indirect sense. That is, the Bible is the Word of God only when it is actually used by the Holy Spirit as an instrument of God's speaking." Bloesch refuses to say that the letter of the Bible is divine revelation. Rather, Scripture is a "medium" by which we hear God's Word.³ Obviously, if Scripture is merely a medium, it cannot be the Word. But if the Bible is only the Word of God subjectively in an indirect sense, if the letter of the Bible is not divine revelation, how is Dr. Bloesch able to espouse the theology he does? Without a proper, biblical *pou sto* ("[a place] where I may stand"), Bloesch

has built the whole of his theological house on sinking sand.

One of Bloesch's latest works is *Holy Scripture*,⁴ which is the second volume of his magnum opus – a seven volume systematic theology. To say the least, it is a strange melange of orthodoxy and neo-orthodoxy. The author, for example, in the earliest pages states that one of the reasons for his writing this book is "to defend the orthodox evangelical faith – from its friends as well as from its enemies" (11). He denounces the position of "biblicistic literalism," as well as that of "biblical latitudinarianism" (the view "that plays fast and loose with the biblical texts"). Bloesch then proposes "a third option": one which seeks to be in the middle of the road (11). Bloesch does not hold to the view of what he calls "evangelical rationalism" (the view taught in Chapter 1 of the Westminster Confession of Faith), which "virtually equates Scripture with divine revelation and finds truth either by deducing conclusions from first principles set forth in Scripture or by deriving principles from the facts recorded in Scripture." Neither does he believe in the "religioethical experientialism" view that makes "human moral experience the supreme criterion in shaping theological understanding." Rather, he opts for a third view: a "biblical evangelicalism." "In this view," says the author, "the Bible is the divinely prepared medium or channel of divine revelation rather than the revelation itself" (18).

The author seems to affirm that the Bible speaks accurately about history, and he has high praise for a number of orthodox creeds, e.g., the Augsburg Confession, the Scots Confession, and the Westminster Confession of Faith. He considers his primary mentors to be orthodox theologians such as Augustine, John Calvin, and Martin Luther (11, 12).

At the same time, Bloesch distinguishes between what the Bible says about history and what it says "existentially." He writes that "we need to recognize that not everything reported in the Bible may be in exact correspondence with historical and scientific fact as we

know it today" (37). Then too, he says that other primary mentors are Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Soren Kierkegaard, and he claims that "the truth of the gospel is primarily a relationship of personal correspondence between the divine Revealer and the believer" (11, 12). Bloesch agrees with the mystic Bernard of Clairvaux that "the Word of God is not primarily a book of general truths and principles but a transforming energy that brings light to the mind and power to the will" (21, 22).

Dr. Bloesch's view of Scripture is errant and dangerous. First, he believes that the Scriptures contain contradictions and errors. For example, says Bloesch, the authors of the Bible taught a geo-centric view of the world, they believed that the kidneys were the organs where the emotions are experienced, and that blood was the "seat of life." Even Jesus taught that the mustard seed was the smallest of all seeds, a statement that is scientifically incorrect. "Such expressions in the Bible," writes Bloesch, "do not indicate real error but only the form or mode in which the teaching of Christ comes to us. Yet we must assume that the writers themselves believed these things and that they were to that extent mistaken" (109). (Does this not attribute error to Jesus Christ as well as to the authors of Scripture?) Then there is the author's view of science and history. Does the Bible accurately record science and history, or does it not? Is Bloesch suggesting that these two disciplines can give us truth apart from Scripture, or that they are to be considered equal to the authority of Scripture? There are times when he seems to believe this, and then there are times when he seems to deny this suggestion. The author cites a number of passages where "what appear to be historical inaccuracies and internal contradictions can readily be discerned in Scripture by any searching person" (109). He concludes, however, that "none of the foregoing examples proves that the Bible contains substantive error, though they are sufficient to shake one's confidence in Scripture if it is based on absolute factual accuracy according to the standards of modern science" (110). Bloesch favorably cites C. S. Lewis (who was not Scriptural in his view of Scripture), who taught that the Bible does not give us "impeccable science or history" (125). Dr. Bloesch goes on to say that "many so-called contradictions are resolved when we see them in the light of the whole of Scripture." But, he continues, "this does not imply that every text can be harmonized with every other one, or that they can be shown to coincide exactly with objective history" (112). To say the least, this is bewildering. Dr. Bloesch continues: "While acknowledging innocent factual inaccuracies in the Bible, I hesitate to call these errors. I readily grant that forms of expression in Scripture may conflict with science, but science is not the final norm, for scientific theories are constantly in a state of flux" (117). Precisely, Dr. Bloesch! Why then so much talk about the "factual accuracy of modern science" (or, for that matter, the objectivity of history)? The professor seems to

be confused. How different his view is from that of Chapter 1 of the Westminster Confession of Faith (a Confession, it should be remembered, for which Bloesch has high praise), which speaks of "the consent [logical consistency] of all the parts" of Scripture, and goes on to say that "the authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, depends not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself), the author thereof; and therefore it is to be received because it is the Word of God."

Second, Bloesch has a truncated view of logic. He takes issue with the fact that human logic is identical with divine logic, i.e., that there is a point of contact between God's logic and human logic. Says Dr. Bloesch, one must never equate the two (121, 293). The author's deprecation of logic is evident when he speaks against "reducing the message of faith to axioms of logic" (28); and when he quotes the neo-orthodox Thomas Torrance with approbation, that the truth of biblical revelation cannot "be caught through the analytical methods of formal logic" (55). Truth, then, to Dr. Bloesch, is not to be equated with the propositions of Scripture. Whereas in Chapter 1 of the Westminster Confession we read that God, "who is truth itself," has revealed Himself to us in Scripture in propositional statements of "infallible truth," Dr. Bloesch hesitates. "Truth in the biblical perspective is primarily a confrontation of understanding to ontological reality rather than a correspondence of perception with facticity. Truth is participation in the creative source and ground of truth rather than technical precision in the recording of facts. It is not the factual as such that is the norm for truth but the revelatory significance of the factual, the factual as seen in relation to God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ" (292). Further, Bloesch writes: "I depart from some of my evangelical colleagues in that I understand the divine content of Scripture not as rationally comprehensible teaching but as the mystery of salvation declared in Jesus Christ" (114). He says: "Yet the law and the gospel cannot be equated with objective propositions either in the creeds of the church or in Holy Scripture. They indicate the divinely given meaning of these propositions, a meaning that is never at the disposal of natural reason" (51, 52). "Revelation cannot be assimilated into a comprehensive, rational system of truth" (289). Why then does Dr. Bloesch attempt to write a systematic theology?

This, of course, is the teaching of Soren Kierkegaard, Emil Brunner, Karl Barth, Thomas Torrance, and Herman Dooyeweerd. And if this line of thought is taken to its logical (the pun is intended) conclusion, we are left with no knowledge of God, or anything else, at all. Why? Because God possesses all knowledge. And if we are going to know anything, our thoughts must coincide with God's thoughts. But if human reasoning is invalid, as these putative theologians claim, then we can never know anything. Third, denying the Biblical view of logic, Dr. Bloesch has a faulty

view of Biblical paradoxes. Orthodox Christianity maintains that the Scripture contains rhetorical paradox: a literary device to challenge or awaken interest in the intellect of the reader (e.g., Matthew 10:39; John 11:25, 26). Logical paradoxes, however, are altogether different. Here we have a situation where an assertion is self-contradictory. The assertion cannot possibly be reconciled before the bar of human reason. And whereas orthodox Christianity teaches that because God is not the author of confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33), logical paradoxes are not found in Scripture, Bloesch demurs (as does neo-orthodoxy, which is sometimes referred to as the "Theology of Paradox"). There is, says the author, a "paradoxical relationship" between the "theological significance of the Bible" and the Holy Spirit (11, 12). "The truth of faith," writes Bloesch, "includes mystery, expressed in the form of paradox, that defies rational penetration" (77). "Truth in the gospel perspective is the revelationally paradoxical – that which can be grasped not by reflective reasoning but only by the passion of faith" (295). Then, in the manner of his mentor Kierkegaard, he claims that the witness to the Incarnation "will necessarily be paradoxical, because the event itself is a paradox to human understanding" (301). Fourth, the author makes much ado about the fact that just as Jesus Christ had both a human and a divine nature, so also there is a human and a divine side of Scripture. The modernists err, he avers, by ignoring the divine side of Scripture, whereas fundamentalists err by ignoring the human side. Bloesch properly insists that both sides must be recognized. But, says the author, just as Christ is both fully human and fully divine, so also is Scripture. And, as Ronald Nash argues, "this he [Bloesch] gives as a reason to refuse (as he does) to equate the words of the Bible with the Word of God." ⁵

For instance, Bloesch writes: "The Bible has a real humanity as do Jesus Christ and his church.... [Who denies this?] We cannot posit within history a pure, distilled Word of God, free from all human traces.... [Who has done this?] The Bible's participation in the truth of divine revelation is analogous to Jesus the man's participation in Christ as God" (69). "God's Word cannot be frozen in the pages of Scripture" (67). Bloesch presents a non sequitur: "If we make an absolute identity between the words of the Bible and the Word of God, then every command in Scripture becomes a universal or absolute command.... I cannot accept James Packer's view that 'the biblical writers' thoughts' are, 'strictly and precisely, the communicated thoughts of God.' Not every idea expressed in Scripture is the 'mind of Christ' " (58). And again: "One might say that the Bible is the Word of God in a formal sense – as a light bulb is related to light. The light bulb is not itself the light but its medium" (59). How odd. It would be more plausible to say the light bulb is the source, not the medium. Orthodox Christianity likewise insists that the Bible has both a human and a divine side. But the human

side does not reduce Scripture to something less than divine revelation. The Bible was written by men, but it was written by men who spoke "as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21), to the point where they wrote nothing other than that which God intended, thus rendering their writings infallible and inerrant. Jesus himself, both a man and the Second Person of the Trinity, spoke words that were at once human and divine. He says that what one reads in the Bible, written by human authors, "was spoken to you by God" (Matthew 22:31). "All Scripture" (written by men), asserts Paul, "is God breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16). Gordon Clark, after citing 2 Samuel 23:2 and Acts 1:16, writes: "The meaning of these verses is unmistakable. No exegesis could make them plainer. They say explicitly that the words which proceeded from the mouth of David and were written on the manuscript were the words of the Holy Ghost. Since these words are the very words of God, we are fully justified in concluding that they are therefore true, infallibly true." ⁶

At this point as well, it is hard to distinguish between Bloesch's concept of Scripture and that of neoorthodoxy. He wants to remove himself from neo-orthodoxy when he writes: "The neo-orthodox error is to imply that the Word of God has only an accidental relation to the Bible by virtue of the fact that God time and again speaks through it" (72, 73). His attempt at finding a middle ground (as noted above) is noticeable in the following confusing statement: "The Bible is both the revelation and the bearer of revelation. It is revelation cast in written form and the original witness to revelation. It is a component of revelation and a vehicle of revelation. It objectively contains revelation in the sense that its witness is based on revelation" (63). Yet, the author also says that Scripture "becomes revelation for us only in the moment of decision, in the awakening of faith.... Scripture is the mediate source of revelation, but only Jesus Christ is the original or eternal source" (63). As cited above, Bloesch denies that Scripture is revelation and that revelation is to be equated with "objective propositions." He is opposed to "reducing" the Word of God to "the propositions of the Bible" (151). Now it is true that the Word of God is not to be "reduced" merely to "the propositions of the Bible." That which may be logically deduced from the propositions of Scripture is also the Word of God. In the words of Chapter 1 of the Confession: "The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture." But this is not what Dr. Bloesch is referring to; his problem is with "objective propositions." He writes: "For the biblical theologian truth is not a universal idea or principle.... It is first of all not a proposition but a relationship" (294). Is his proposition true? Perhaps Dr. Bloesch should express his truth without words or propositions. It would make his books a lot shorter.

"Scripture in itself is the written Word of God, comprising by virtue of its divine inspiration a reliable witness to the truth revealed by God in Jesus Christ. But it becomes the living Word when it actually communicates to us the truth and power of the cross of Christ through the illumination of the Spirit" (25, 26). He makes explicit his rejection of the Bible: "The Bible in and of itself is not the Word of God – divine revelation – but it is translucent to this revelation by virtue of the Spirit of God working within it and within the mind of the reader and hearer" (27). Bloesch goes on to write: "Not every idea expressed in Scripture is the 'mind of Christ,' but every idea can become the vehicle of the mind of Christ" (58). "The Bible is not the incarnate word of God, but it is the document of the revelation of God's word.... Scripture is one step removed from revelation" (67, 68). In a similar vein, Dr. Bloesch seems to teach that Scripture only becomes revelation when energized by the Holy Spirit. He wants to say that Biblical revelation gives us objective truth; Scripture avers that the teachings of Scripture are true whether one believes them or not, but Bloesch disagrees. To him the Word of God is only a natural, human word unless it is directed by the Spirit (61). As Nash states; "A basic fault of Bloesch's treatment of Scripture is his continual confusion of two different senses of truth. It is difficult to find any place in his discussion of revelation and the Bible where Bloesch concedes that a particular statement in Scripture is true (and revelational) if it is not also salvational." ⁷For example, Bloesch favorably quotes A.W. Tozer when he writes: "the mind can grasp the shell [of biblical truth] but only the Spirit of God can lay hold of the internal essence.... We have forgotten that the essence of spiritual truth cannot come to the one who knows the external shell of truth unless there is first a miraculous operation of the Spirit within the heart" (69). This is absurd. How difficult is it for a non-believer, for instance, to understand the Bible teaches that Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem (Luke 2:1-7)? Can this truth be grasped only by a regenerate mind? Does not James 2:19 teach that even unregenerate demons possess a knowledge of some Biblical truth?

Conclusion

Though Dr. Bloesch expresses a love for Christ and his written Word, and though some of what he says is true to the historical Reformed faith, his view of Scripture is false. If one takes the author's "middle road" view of the Word of God, which seems to the present writer to be virtually neo-orthodox, to its logical conclusion, one will find himself mired in skepticism. When one denies that the Bible is the Word of God itself, one cannot have any certain knowledge of Jesus Christ: the Word of God incarnate. The Bible must be the axiomatic starting point for the Christian. Scripture as the Word of God is first; all doctrines are deduced from this starting point. That is why the Westminster divines began their study of systematic

theology with "Of the Holy Scripture" in Chapter 1 of the Confession. There we read that "the whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men." This being the case, I cannot agree with Timothy George when he writes that "there is much in Bloesch's doctrine of Scripture that can be warmly embraced by all evangelicals." ⁸ As Solomon warned centuries ago, when one embraces fire, he will be burned (Proverbs 6:27). Or in the words of Amos, two cannot walk together unless they are in agreement (3:3). And of all the places where agreement is necessary the most important is the starting point of Christianity, Scripture.

Notes

- 1 Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, Volumes I-II (San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1978).
- 2 Timothy George, *Christianity Today* (June 20, 1994), 38.
- 3 Ronald H. Nash, *The Word of God and the Mind of Man* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 124, 125.
- 4 Donald G. Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration & Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994).
- 5 Nash, *op. cit.*, 126.
- 6 Gordon H. Clark, *God's Hammer* (Trinity Foundation, 1995), 53.
- 7 Nash, *op. cit.*, 128.
- 8 George, *op. cit.*, 38.