

# **VERDICT**

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## **The Post-Copernican Age of Theology**

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In 1543 Nicolaus Copernicus, the Polish astronomer, advanced the theory that the earth was not the stationary center of the universe. That one simple discovery had enormous repercussions. The entire scientific world-view of the medieval era collapsed. The modern scientific age was born.

The transition from one age to another, however, did not take place overnight, nor without a struggle. Men then did not like to be proved wrong any more than they do today. They used prejudice, ignorance, prestige, influence and, above all, religion to fight an idea whose time had come. Yet in the end their resistance to scientific truth and the changes it brought was all in vain.

One of the greatest gains of the post Copernican age has been the triumph of the scientific method. 1 Men have been liberated to investigate the data and to report the facts as they find them. Science has been set free from the shackles of religious dogmatism which predetermined the way things should be observed and the facts reported.

But it has taken the scientific method much longer to triumph in the field of the theological and biblical sciences. This victory was not gained in the era of the Protestant Reformation as many suppose. Protestant scholasticism quickly developed closed theological systems which dictated the way the Bible should be read. The *so la scriptura* slogan of Protestants often served to blind them to the degree that they were passing the Bible through the grid of their own dogmatic systems. 2

The eighteenth century gave birth to such movements as the enlightenment, rationalism and biblical criticism. Staunch Christians who treasure their religious heritage have generally regarded these new movements as unmitigated evils sent by the devil to undermine the authority of the Bible and the Christian faith.

We would, however, like to suggest another way of viewing the contribution of these movements to the Christian scene. God once used a Gentile bully named Nebuchadnezzar to destroy an intolerable religious tyranny which had developed in Jerusalem. We wish to suggest that such forces as the enlightenment, rationalism, biblical criticism and liberalism have been intellectual Nebuchadnezzars providentially used to break the stranglehold of old dogmatic systems over the minds of millions of Christians. 3

Our century has been an era of astounding technological progress. In almost every field of science, knowledge doubles every few years. New textbooks are out of date before the ink is dry. The biblical sciences have experienced a similar explosion of knowledge, especially since World War II. Three factors have been chiefly responsible for this:

1. The discovery of vital documents has given us access to a wealth of new information. Discoveries such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Ebla Tablets, the Nag Hammadi texts, and of many other ancient manuscripts have thrown much light on the text and the times of the Bible.

2. There has been the application of better methods of study. Until recently biblical scholars were far more inclined to allow dogmatic presuppositions to determine the way they interpreted biblical passages. But the scientific method has repeatedly triumphed over allegiance to dogmatic traditions. The scientific climate of our age has demanded far greater objectivity from those engaged in biblical research.

3. Modern technology has given many more people rapid and efficient access to a range of information not possible before. The entire world of biblical research is readily available to every scholar. It now takes much less time to benefit from the labors of others.

All this has resulted in astounding progress in the biblical sciences. Again and again the misunderstandings of centuries have been cleared away. We are witnessing what one Christian scholar calls a “revolution comparable to that of Copernicus in astronomy.” 5 Not least among the areas in which knowledge has increased is the history of the primitive church. In his definitive work on Jewish Christianity, for instance, Jean Daniélou remarked, “How marvelously it has become possible in the last ten years, after seventeen centuries of obscurity, to begin to discern once again the features of the unknown face of the Primitive Church.” 6

In recent years scholars have relentlessly pursued the task of gathering every piece of religious, social, economic and political information that would help us discern more accurately the actual historical situation behind the New Testament documents.

Biblical faith is a historical faith. The better we understand the historical circumstances behind the biblical text, the better we may understand what the text is saying. Heretofore we have all been too ready to press texts into the service of our dogmatic systems instead of first asking, "What did this text literally mean to those to whom it was first addressed." What we have lost in the way of treasured "proof-texts" to bolster our religious prejudices we have more than gained in a new freedom from the tyranny of closed systems of theology.

The great gains in historical and biblical knowledge have put our age in a position to understand what the Bible is saying more clearly than any generation which has gone before. But there are no gains without pains. All the old theological systems of Christendom, together with the power structures which have grown out of them, have suddenly become as outmoded as the Flat Earth Society. The Westminster Confession, for example, is a great statement of Christian faith; but, for all its grandeur, it expresses the limitations of seventeenth-century dogmatics. To expect that Christians must still read their Bibles and live out their piety according to the letter of this confession is nothing short of a monstrosity and an intolerable religious tyranny. 7

Whenever the truth is equated with a religious structure or faith is directed to a dogmatic system, people will feel seriously threatened by new information. As human beings, we not only build houses, cities and empires for our sense of security and self-importance, but we build philosophies and religious systems. These become our "golden calf." But leading thinkers of the Christian movement sense that we have come to what one has dared call "the end of Christendom." 8 F. F. Bruce says it is an era of change comparable to the great changes which took place when Judaism gave place to the Christian gospel. 9 Douglas John Hall, Professor of Christian Theology at McGill University, declares, "Christendom as Western Christianity imagined it and tried to create it for some sixteen centuries has come to an end."10 It is not the gates of hell which have prevailed against the old structures, but it is the progress of truth which has made them appear as relics of a pre-Copernican age.

## **The Salutary Fruits of the New Era**

Some Christians have been so concerned with the way the "historical-critical method" has been used by radical elements to attack the Christian faith that they are too willing to repudiate the tools of biblical science altogether. It is true that a mere avalanche of information is not an unqualified benefit. It may be used destructively. Yet we need to appreciate that the revolution in biblical knowledge is a great opportunity for the gospel.

1. The fruits of biblical science leave Christians with far fewer things to be dogmatic about. In view of our propensity to be intolerant and paranoid toward those who do not see everything our way, this will be, a profound benefit. In the past, Christians have tended to use a "proof-text method" which conscripted texts to support their

traditional dogmatic systems. But when the Bible is allowed to speak within its own historical context, the arguments in many areas of debate become largely irrelevant—e.g., predestinarianism, sabbatarianism, sacramentarianism and ecclesiastical orders. There is no point in perpetuating religious division and hostility over a supposed New Testament pattern of worship when we learn that there was great diversity on these points in the primitive Christian movement.

We are not suggesting that we should be dogmatic about nothing. The agony of sectarian division would be better than a wishy-washy ecumenism which stands for nothing. The eternal verities of the Christian gospel have withstood the most searching historical and biblical criticism. Instead of giving unflinching allegiance to dogmatic systems, we can now concentrate our devotion on the person of Christ and his gospel.

2. The post-Copernican revolution in biblical knowledge will help Christians recapture the posture of a pilgrim community. The church too easily forgets her pilgrim vocation. She likes to settle down as if she were a holy city which encompasses the truth. The tidy minds of theologians like to confine the faith to a closed system of thought which then becomes a terrible tyranny over the minds of Christians. But the avalanche of historical and biblical knowledge has exposed the inadequacies of all closed systems. It gives to God's people the opportunity to regain the character of a "Diaspora" community always ready to move on in the tents of faith.

3. Finally, the enormous volume of information available today makes it imperative that we organize this information around a living center. As one author has so brilliantly written:

**The man of knowledge in our time is bowed down under a burden he never imagined he would ever have: the overproduction of truth that cannot be consumed. For centuries man lived in the belief that truth was slim and elusive and that once he found it the troubles of mankind would be over. And here we are in the closing decades of the 20th century, choking on truth....**

**One of the reasons, I believe, that knowledge is in a state of useless overproduction is that it is strewn all over the place, spoken in a thousand competitive voices. Its insignificant fragments are magnified all out of proportion, while its major and world-historical insights lie around begging for attention. There is no throbbing, vital center. 11**

No amount of biblical information will make any true sense unless the vital, throbbing center of the biblical witness shines through. That center is God's great saving deed in the dying and rising of his Son, who now reigns as Lord of all at God's right hand. The gospel of Christ must dominate in such a way that it determines the meaning and significance of every piece of biblical information. This will mean that more information will only make more transparent the simplicity of salvation by faith in Christ's gospel plus nothing.

In science there is a principle that the simplest explanation for what appears to be the most complicated array of facts is generally the true one. That God himself has come to this earth in the person of Jesus, that he has identified himself with us sinful people and has wrought an eternal triumph for us, is the mystery which explains every

other mystery. Just as astronomy began to make sense when Copernicus put the sun at the center of the solar system, so theology makes sense only when Christ's gospel is made the central concern of his people. This and this alone should be our badge of distinction and our bond of union.

## Notes and References

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

1. "The only permanent thing about science is its method: the glory of modern science lies not in its results, impressive though these are, but in its method. It is not otherwise with theology" (Alan Richardson, *The Bible in the Age of Science* [Westminster Press, 1961], p. 78),
2. "In the post-Reformation ... the Bible was used to support dogmatic statements. As a result, the Bible was understood as a collection of proof texts.... In reality the dogmatic system and not the Bible . . . was the supreme authority" (Elizabeth Achtemeier, *The Old Testament and the Proclamation of the Gospel* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973], pp. 22-3). See also James D. Smart, "The Treacherousness of Tradition," *Interpretation* 30, no. 1 (Jan. 1976): 19-23) Richardson, *Age of Science*, pp. 70, 139-40, and 161.
3. "In the Enlightenment, in every discipline, man was freed from the authority of scholastic systems, to become the measure of all things. . .Rationalism decisively showed that the Bible could not possibly be reduced to a unified handbook of dogmatic instruction without doing violence to it" (Achtemeier, *Old Testament*, pp. 23-4).
4. Cullmann emphasizes this when he says, "know of no other 'attitude' toward the text than obedient willingness to listen to it even when what I hear is sometimes completely foreign, contradictory to my own favorite ideas, whatever they may be; the willingness at least to take the trouble to understand and present it, regardless of my own philosophical and theological 'opinions'; and above all the willingness to guard against designating a biblical statement a dispensable 'form' because it is unacceptable to me on the basis of my opinions" (Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963]. p. xiv).
5. Pidoux made this statement in reference to the rediscovery of the biblical view of wholistic man (quoted in C. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, Studies in Dogmatics [Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962], p. 200n). But his description of the revolution in the area of anthropology may be aptly applied to every area of Christian theology.
6. Jean Daniélou-*The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, vol.1, *A History of Early Christian Doctrine before the Council of Nicaea* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), p. 5.
7. "Most Presbyterian churches for three hundred years have been plagued by the endeavor of some of their members to make the Westminster Confession of Faith in all its details an absolute and infallible criterion of faith and practice, which would anchor the church's mind and heart in the mid-seventeenth century and unfit it to face the emerging issues of our own time" (Smart, 'The Treacherousness of Tradition,' p. 19).
8. See Malcolm Muggeridge, *The End of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980).
9. See F. F. Bruce, "The Kerygma of Hebrews," *Interpretation* 23, no. 1 (Jan. 1969): 17-19.
10. Douglas John Hall, *Has the Church a Future?* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), p 32.
11. Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1973), p.x.

**“All the certainties of the industrial society in which we live are disintegrating. We are witnessing an erosion of ideologies, economic theories, and traditional culture. That is because all our assumptions, all our theories and religions come from the 19th century, from an industrial period that is approaching its end. Marxism and capitalism, for example, are 19th- century doctrines, each intended as the driving force of a system that no longer corresponds to the prevailing economy or to the scientific age now being ushered in. “— Michel Poniatowski, Minister of the Interior under former French President Valery Giscard d’ Estaing, in an interview for the news magazine “Pourquoi Pas?”- of Brussels, quoted in World Press Review 29, no. 10 (Oct. 1982): 23.**

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