

Research Paper

The Neo-Orthodox View of Revelation

individual to individual according to the moment; they are firm, solid and true by Clive Ashby

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INTRODUCTION

This paper will evaluate the neo-orthodox view of revelation, in comparison to an evangelical orthodox view. The first section will provide an overview of neo-orthodoxy. Section two will examine the neo-orthodox view about the source of the authoritative revelation, as to whether it is the Messiah, the Bible, or both. Section three will examine the neo-orthodox view of the Bible, as to when it becomes the Word of God, whether in specific moments or at all times.

1. SUMMARY OF NEO-ORTHODOXY

Rather than being a unified movement or system of belief, neo-orthodoxy is more a theological approach to encountering God, with a specific approach to revelation, the scriptures, and faith in Christ (Elwell 1984:754; Enns 1989:559). Neo-

orthodoxy was so called because originally it was regarded as a ‘new’ twentieth century development of theology positive. On (1989:456) explains that it is “orthodox in as much as it emphasises key themes of Reformed theology, but ‘neo-’ i.e. ‘new’, in as much as it has taken serious account of contemporary cultural and theological developments”. However, as Enns (1989:559) argues, it can hardly be called a new orthodoxy since “it nonetheless has retained the foundations of liberalism”. Neo-orthodoxy was established by the Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, and subsequently developed by a number of theologians including Brunner, Bultmann, Gogarten, Tillich, and Niebuhr (Baxter 2014:1; Cairns 1996:462; Enns 1989:559; Ferguson 1989:457; Klein 2004:58). It came about after the first world war as a reaction to late-nineteenth century and early twentieth century liberal protestant theology, (Cairns 1996:462; Elwell 1984:755; Ferguson 1989:456). At the end of the first world war, the ‘naively optimistic’ liberal perspective that mankind is essentially good and progressing forward was seriously questioned following the massive scale of death and destruction (Elwell 1984:754; Ferguson 1989:456). Neo-orthodoxy bases revelation on the “personal encounter between God and man” (Erikson 1985:184). Its viewpoint is built on an existentialist outlook of God and revelation, developed from the writings of Soren Kierkegaard (Cairns 1996:462; Elwell 1984:755; Enns 1989:559; Klein 2004:57). Whereas orthodox theology argues that “God can and is fully known through the authoritative Word of God” (Baxter 2014:1), neo-2 orthodoxy argues that “God cannot be known through objective doctrine, but through an experience of revelation” (Baxter 2014:1). On the positive side neo-orthodoxy managed to counter liberal theology, stressing God’s sovereignty and transcendence, that mankind in his sin cannot bridge the chasm to God by his own efforts, only through Christ (Elwell 1984:756; Ferguson 1989:456). However, on the negative side, neo-orthodoxy “denied the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible” (Enns 1989:563), declaring that “the Bible is not the Word of God until it becomes that for the individual” (Enns 1989:564).

2. THE SOURCE OF AUTHORITATIVE REVELATION

In section two, the following pages will examine in more detail the neo-orthodox view of whether Jesus, the scriptures, or both, are the authoritative revelation of God.

A. Neo-Orthodox View of Authoritative Revelation

A central tenet of Neo-orthodoxy is that “Christ is the sole authoritative revelation of God” (Baxter 2014:1). “Christ must be the beginning point and centre of theology. Without Christ there is no revelation, according to Barth” (Enns 1989:563). Neo-orthodoxy claims that revelation is only through Christ, since

Jesus is “the word made flesh” (Elwell 1984:755). In its view, scripture cannot be authoritative since it is only a pointer to the Word made flesh, it can do nothing more than point to the authoritative revelation which is in Christ. This view differs greatly from orthodox theology, which claims that both Christ and the scriptures are the authoritative revelation of God. “Special revelation is that which has come through Christ (John 1:18) and through the Bible (1 John 5:9-12)” (Ryrie 1972:37). For neo-orthodoxy, only Christ can be the authoritative revelation of God since the Bible, being written by humans is therefore full of errors, myths and legends (Goetjen 2014:4). It can therefore only be “witness to revelation, rather than being an inspired ...revelation in itself” (Cairns 1996:463). As Goppert (2014:37) explains, “Christ to a Barthian, is the true Word of God, whereas the scripture is not the actual, authoritative Word of God, in that it is the product of fallible writers, it can only in a fallible way point to Christ”. Goetjen (1961:3) explains that for neo-orthodoxy the Bible is “merely a human record or witness to revelation. They say that God has revealed Himself in His mighty acts and then the writers of the Bible gave their interpretation of this revelation”. So there is a direct contrast between neo-orthodoxy and the orthodox view, which holds that all scriptures are the direct revealed Word of God through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and therefore are inerrant, infallible and authoritative (Goetjen 1961:2). The neo orthodox view that Christ is the only authoritative revelation of God, fails however to stand up under further examination. The following pages will outline four challenges to this neo-orthodox view of revelation.

B. The First Challenge: Contradiction

The first challenge is that this viewpoint is a direct contradiction to Christ’s statements about scripture. In John 10:35 (NLT), Jesus says “and you know that the Scriptures cannot be altered”. MacDonald (1995: John 10:35) explains that in saying this Christ is “expressing His belief in the inspiration of the OT Scriptures. He speaks of them as infallible writings which must be fulfilled, and which cannot be denied”. Since in this passage Jesus is referring to the word ‘gods’, Christ is arguing that not just the concepts but that every single word is inspired by God. In Matthew 24:35 (NIV), Jesus is recorded as saying that “heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away”. Jesus is stating that whereas the atmospheric heavens, the sky, the stars and sun will pass away, “these predictions of the Lord Jesus would not go unfulfilled” (MacDonald 1995: Mat.24:35). Yet these prophecies of Christ can only be known today through their record in scripture. In Mark 7:10-13, Jesus when he opposes the Pharisees’ wrong application of the fifth commandment, refers to “the writings of Moses as the Word of God” (NIV), demonstrating that the Pentateuch is authoritative for determining one’s understanding and behaviour (Goetjen 1961:2). In Matthew 4:1-

11, when Jesus is tempted by Satan, he responds to the attack by stating three times “it is written” (NIV). Clearly in this situation only the very Word of God would have the power to stand against Satan. Jesus used these words of the Old Testament as the authoritative Word of God. In John 17:17, Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane for future believers saying, “sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth” (NIV). MacDonald (1995: Mat. 24:35) points out that “He did not say... ‘Your word contains truth’ but ‘Your word IS truth’”. Note that Jesus in saying your word is truth, is referring to all scriptures prior to his teaching, as the very words of God (Goetjen 1961:3). Three verses later in John 17:20, Jesus says “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message” (NIV). Here Jesus refers to those who will in the future believe in⁴ Christ through the authoritative teaching of the apostles, the very scriptures which now form the New Testament. Thus Christ was pointing to these future scriptures as the inspired Word of God through which people will believe in Him (Goetjen 1961:3).

C. The Second Challenge: Substance

The second challenge follows that according to neo-orthodoxy, if the scriptures are not authoritative, then how can people come to know this Christ they are to believe in? How will people come to know who Christ is if it is not as Jesus said in John 17:20 to be through the inspired scriptures of the apostles? If these gospels and epistles are not accurate records of Jesus life and teaching, then where else can believers truly learn about Christ and how to live for him? In response, neo-orthodoxy states that one cannot know Christ through the scriptures or historical records, since Christ is not actually the historical Jesus. Instead he is the “Christ of faith, the risen Christ” (Elwell 1984:755). Neo-orthodoxy argues that since the ‘real’ Christ is risen, not historical, one can only come to know and follow the Messiah through a personal encounter with Christ, a personal experience. “The important Christ is the one experienced by the individual” (Baxter 2014:1).

D. The Third Challenge: Subjectivity

However, belief in a ‘Christ of faith’ raises the problem of subjectivity. How can there be one absolute Christ, saviour of all mankind, if this understanding of Christ is not objective, if it’s not based upon some form of authoritative truth? If revelation of Christ is through a personal mystical experience, how can this be verified as true revelation rather than personal emotions or psychological imbalance? As Goetjen (1961:6) asks “are they manufacturing for themselves in their imaginations a Jesus Christ which does not exist except in their own preconceptions?” Which Jesus is neo-orthodoxy believing is if this is not based upon some form of solid foundation of truth?

E. The Fourth Challenge: Blind Faith

As a result, neo-orthodoxy requires believers to take a ‘blind leap of faith’, with no body of knowledge to base their faith upon. For if the scriptures are not recognised as an authoritative revelation from God, then there is no substance on which to base one’s faith, except for a mystical unsubstantiated ‘blind faith’. Baxter (2014:1) argues that in the absence of any revealed authoritative body of truth, neo-orthodoxy is expecting people to make a “commitment to God in a blind leap of faith”.⁵ The problem Goetjen (1961:5) argues is that “you cannot have the belief in justification by faith in Christ without the belief in “the Verbal Inspiration and Inerrancy of Scripture”. You cannot know that you are saved by faith in Christ because of his atoning sacrifice on the cross, unless you first know the very teachings explaining this to be true in the epistles. The fallacy of neo-orthodox belief is that it “ignores the fact that we cannot have a building without a foundation. Destroy the foundation (the formal principle) and you cannot erect a proper building and if you have one it is doomed to certain collapse” (Goetjen 1961:5).

F. Summary

To summarise, the problem with neo-orthodoxy’s denial of the divine inspiration of scripture is that as a result there is no objective basis for revelation, nothing clear-cut on which to sacrifice and devote one’s life to, only a subjective experiential reality. For neo-orthodoxy, Jesus’ claim in John 14:6 to be the truth as well as the light cannot be affirmed because there is no body of absolute truth. Neo-orthodoxy can only assert the ‘spirit part’ of Jesus’ statement in John 4:23-24, that true worshippers will worship God in spirit and truth; since it is impossible to worship God in truth when there is no ‘truth’ in neo-orthodoxy, only a subjective encounter.

3. THE BIBLE AND THE WORD OF GOD

Section three will examine in more detail the neo-orthodox view of when scripture is the revelation of God. Does the Bible only become the Word of God when it ‘speaks’ to an individual? Or is the Bible always the Word of God whether or not it ‘speaks’ to an individual at a given moment?

A. Neo-orthodox Understanding of the Bible and Revelation

Whereas orthodox theology argues that God can be “fully known through the authoritative Word of God”, neo-orthodoxy argues that “God cannot be known through objective doctrine, but through an experience of revelation” (Baxter 2014:1). Unlike orthodoxy, which understands the Bible to be always the Word of

God, neo-orthodoxy only sees the Bible becoming the Word of God during that encounter when it speaks to the believer.

As Goppert (2014:37) explains, for neo-orthodoxy, “the Bible becomes the Word of God if it speaks subjectively to one’s heart. The Bible on the shelf is not the Word”. The Bible is not in itself the revelation of God; it only turns into revelation when the individual⁶ has an encounter with God through scripture. “The Bible becomes relevant to the individual in the moment of crisis, when the Holy Spirit uses it to effect a personal encounter with God” (Cairns 1996:463). Erickson (1985:185) explains that it is only in the moment of encounter, that “one may truthfully say that the bible is the Word of God, but not through some inherent quality it has”. However, when “God withdraws his presence, the Bible is simply what it was before: the words of Moses, Isaiah, Luke or whomever” (Erickson 1985:185). Enns (1989:562) explains how it is when reading the scriptures that a person can “experience the revelation of God; at that moment the scripture becomes the Word of God to that person”. Neo-orthodoxy sees the revelation of God not as absolute truths throughout the Bible, but only at the moment when scripture “is recognised and received by man” (Ferguson 1989:562). Outside of that moment where a scripture ‘speaks’ to man, it can no longer be God’s revelation. “Rather than regard the Bible as revelation the proponents... call it a ‘medium’ of revelation. They hold that as man studies this Bible of myths, legends, and inaccuracies, God ‘confronts’ or ‘breaks through to’ the individual with His claim upon him and they thus experience an ‘encounter’ with God” (Goetjen 2014:4). Without this encounter of scripture, neo-orthodoxy argues that the Bible is just “a human book subject to biblical criticism like any other book” (Cairns 1996:463). In this sense, neo-orthodoxy has continued in the approach of liberal theology, viewing “scripture to be a human fallible and errant document” (Ferguson 1989: 456). Karl Barth, the founder of neo-orthodoxy, together with the leading theologians of Emil Brunner and Reinhold Niebuhr, “denied the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible” (Ferguson 1989:563). They refuted the historicity and credibility of the creation and fall of man considering them to be a legend handed down through the generations (Baxter 2014:1; Ferguson 1989:563). The reason neo-orthodoxy will not acknowledge the Bible in itself to be absolute divine revelation is because “black marks on a white page can never be revelation in and of themselves.” (Grimstead 2014:1). Neo-orthodoxy only recognises “something that happens, not something that is. Thus, when the neo-orthodox speak of revelation, they have in mind the process as opposed to the product of revelation (what is said or written about it), and the revealing as opposed to what is revealed. The historical event and for that matter; the account of it are not the revelation” (Erickson 1985:185). In other words it is only when the scripture ‘speaks’ to the believer that

there is revelation, not the substance of the words themselves. Thus Neo-orthodoxy will deny any of the scriptures themselves as⁷ revelation from God since it is only when they are encountered, when it speaks to the reader that revelation occurs. This neo-orthodox view is in complete contrast to evangelical orthodoxy which asserts that all parts of the Bible are “infallible, inspired and inerrant”, not only a passage which has ‘spoken’ to the individual today (Baxter 2014:1). Since all scripture conveys God’s message, irrespective of one’s encounter, Erikson (2001:77) argues that “the Bible carries the same weight God himself would command if he were speaking to us personally”. This neo-orthodox view that the Bible only becomes revelation when it ‘speaks’ to a believer, fails to stand up in light of the following four issues of contention.

B. The First Issue: Contradiction

The first issue is that the neo-orthodox view of scripture is in contradiction to the Bible’s claims about itself. 2 Timothy 3:16 states that “all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (NIV). In this passage Paul states that all the words in the Bible are inspired, literally God-breathed, referring here to the whole of the Old Testament, not simply those words which ‘speak’ to a believer today (Ryrie 1972:36). Romans 3:2 states that “the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God” (NIV). Here Paul is referring to the Jewish nation having been entrusted with the Old Testament scriptures which were not a ‘witness to revelation’, but the very revelation itself from God. 1 Corinthians 2:13 states, “This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words” (NIV). Paul is stating here that the very words we the apostles speak through these epistles are from the Holy Spirit, irrelevant of whether the believer has had an encounter with them today. 2 Peter 1:20-21 states “above all, you must realize that no prophecy in Scripture ever came from the prophet’s own understanding, or from human initiative. No, those prophets were moved by the Holy Spirit, and they spoke from God” (NLT). Peter who experienced a powerful encounter with God at the transfiguration, states in this passage that this has led him to an even greater confidence in the words of the Old Testament prophets who were not speaking their own human words, as Neo-orthodoxy would claim, but the very words of God.⁸ If any of these scriptures were to ‘speak’ to an individual and so ‘become’ the Word of God, they would clearly challenge believers to consider every part of the Bible as the revelation of God, irrespective of an encounter. For neo-orthodoxy to remain valid these passages must never ‘speak’ to believers, since their statements on the inspiration of all scripture would lead to contradictions with this theology.

C. The Second Issue: Subjectivity and Imbalance

The second issue of contention is that of subjectivity and imbalance. For neo-orthodoxy, the revelation of God's message is completely subjective, reliant upon one's experiential encounter with scripture. It is not clear how a believer will know that this encounter with scripture is taking place and how one would know that scripture is 'speaking' to him, as opposed to his own personal emotions or thinking. As Klein (2004:58) argues, "such encounters are so subjective, mysterious, and miraculous that they elude the objective measurements of science". With a believer's exposure to revelation being reliant upon only the texts which 'speak' to him, there is no overall body of truth to provide a balanced framework for belief and action. There is the serious danger that the person may develop a distorted view of God and salvation, according to which particular passages 'speak' to him. Depending on what the believer reads and experiences 'speaking' to him, he may become overtly focussed for example, on God's love while denying God's judgment. Guidelines for living godly lives will be entirely subjective to what the believer has read and feels has 'spoken' to him. If a believer for example does not sense that the passages about sexual immorality 'speak' to him, he may then think it's okay to be unfaithful to his wife.

D. The Third Issue: No Foundation

This neo-orthodox requirement for an encounter to convert scripture into revelation, denies the possibility for the Bible to provide a foundation of truth on which to base people's beliefs and actions. Neo-orthodoxy's denial of the creation and fall of man robs the believer of any basis for Christ's salvation beyond the personal subjective experience. There can be no solid basis of truth on which the believer can be confident of the hope for eternal life. There is only a subjective encounter with Christ, the impact of which can ebb and flow (Titus 1:1-2). Without a solid foundation of truth, neo-orthodox Christianity "can have no reply to those who claim to have encountered God through other religions and would therefore adopt an alternative basis to theology" (Ferguson 1989:456).⁹

E. The Fourth Issue: Revelation through Errors

Finally, on a fourth note, this neo-orthodox approach to scripture suffers from being incoherent. To suppose that a scripture considered to be fallible and riddled with errors, can suddenly through an encounter 'speak' to a person as the revelation of God is questionable. In light of God's nature, how would it be possible for the revelation of God to speak through a text which is unreliable and false?

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the central problem of neo-orthodoxy is that it “has confused Revela illumination” (Enns 1989:564). What Karl Barth has described as scripture ‘speaking’ to a believer is not when it becomes revelation, but rather the point at which this revelation is illuminated to the believer by the Holy Spirit, in order to bring for further understanding and personal application. Illumination does not deny the inspiration of all scripture; it simply helps to highlight a passage, while acknowledging that all scripture is ‘God-breathed’.

Overall, the neo-orthodox view of revelation suffers from a lack of logical credibility. It contradicts the very statements Jesus made of scripture and with which the Bible speaks of itself. It denies any basis of truth by which the believer can come to objectively know about Christ, and the means by which he can be saved. It leads to an entirely subjective experience of faith based on a personal encounter with Christ and scripture. It is dubious to think that a creator God would allow the revelation of himself to mankind to be restricted to such subjective experiential encounters, without a solid basis of truth through which to communicate the basis for belief and living for God.

In contrast, the evangelical orthodox view states that God has revealed a body of truth known as the scriptures which are for all time, not subject to an individual’s experience. These inspired scriptures, the orthodox view contends, do not vary from worthy. They do not simply support a spiritual encounter, rather they reveal the entire nature of God and man, the problem of evil and the need for salvation, to all mankind irrespective of whether they have encountered it or not.¹⁰

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