

THE SPRINGFIELDER

Vol. XXXI

Winter, 1968

No. 4

THE SPRINGFIELDER is published quarterly by the faculty of Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois, of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

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Contents

PAGE

EDITORIAL

True or False? 3

THE NEW SCOFIELD REFERENCE BIBLE 6

RAYMOND F. SURBURG, Department of Old Testament

CHRISTIANITY, THE CHAPLAINCY, AND MILITARISM 24

EUGENE F. KLUG, Department of Systematic Theology

THE PROPOSED RITE FOR HOLY BAPTISM—
Biblically Considered 30

DAVID P. SCAER, Department of Systematic Theology

ANNOUNCEMENT: THIRD BIBLE LANDS SEMINAR 36

BOOK REVIEWS 38

BOOKS RECEIVED 63

Indexed in INDEX TO RELIGIOUS PERIODICAL LITERATURE, published by the American Theological Library Association, Speer Library, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey.

Clergy changes of address reported to Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Missouri, will also cover mailing change of *The Springfielder*. Other changes of address should be sent to the Business Manager of *The Springfielder*, Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois 62702.

Address communications to the Editor, Erich H. Heintzen, Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois 62702.

Editorial

True or False?

TRUTH, IT IS SAID, never dies; error is capable of repeated resurrection. One is greatly inclined to the latter observation through rather direct and compelling empirical shock. Sometimes one is disinclined to the former through similar experience. Be that as it may, the question of truth occupied men's concern long before Pilate posed the perplexing question in the shadow of a mob which didn't care anything *about* truth and before Him who is the very embodiment of truth.

It's an interesting question. Especially to one who claims in the name of the God of all truth to speak truth. Theologians are usually more than a bit uneasy about it all. They talk about God, and as Augustine put it, truth really *is* God. (Where I have found the truth, there I have found God). So theologians talk about truth, about eternal truth, about profound religious truths which answer the deepest gropings of the human spirit.

We talk about truths of religion while agonizing over the question whether there really are any. In its relation to religious truth philosophy, which Paul Tillich describes as "that cognitive approach to reality in which reality as such is the object," is always ambiguous. It's both a menace and an ally; a menace because it always asks the embarrassing questions. Why should it be so? Can anyone really claim to know the mysteries of God? Remember, the pretensions of faith may rest upon nothing more than illusions, satisfying and comforting perhaps, but illusions nonetheless. Simple faith—and sophisticated faith as well—sometimes becomes inadequate to stand its ground. But philosophy can be a genuine ally when it drives a man to reexamine his suppositions and uncritical assumptions in order to add depth to faith-understanding.

Theologians are also disturbed by the quite fundamental question of linguistic truth. Religious people are determined to communicate the truth they feel they possess. Is language a faithful medium of such communication? Are there "truths of language" which boast some kind of unalterable and unchallenged status? Do words have meaning apart from specific usage? Are words anything more than the logician's tools to play a kind of tautologous propositional game which has nothing whatever to do with ontological meaning? The Medievalists made an interesting distinction between *suppositio* and *significatio*. And the reputed father of Scholasticism is remembered not only for his influence on the classical doctrine of the atonement; Anselm perceived that a statement could be "true" in signifying what it is supposed to signify while at the same time being false if it didn't happen accurately to describe the given state of affairs at the time. In our day religious language is said to have "uncertain status." A good

number of philosophical analysts aren't about to be persuaded that religious language is not just plain nonsense, of the emotive or any other brand.

Philosophers have enriched the search for truth by their insistence upon truths of principles and ideas. The modern mind has a definite penchant for defining truth as empirical correspondence to reality; but a long and noble history of idealism always seems to be prodding the empiricist with that stubborn question, but are you sure? really sure? As John Baillie so disarmingly put it, modern men often seek to know at the top of their heads what they know very well at the bottom of their hearts. Are there idea-truths which simply have normative status because reality is after all rational and man knows indubitably certain universal, necessary, clear and distinct "facts?" Or are the norms merely assigned because men feel that such is the case? After all, new ideas like the Phoenix of old are constantly rising from the debris of old ideas. Can anyone really venture to assay that the old are true and the new false—or vice versa?

Then, too, we are caught up these days in the struggle to define and reassert the validity of moral truth. The so-called new morality, situation ethics, freedom morality, contingent ethics, casuistic ethics and all the other varieties (correctly and incorrectly understood) of the Augustinian love-dictum, puzzle the average church-goer, delight the rebellious amoralist and provide fresh pasture in which confused theologians may ruminate at will. I. M. Crombie suggests that our contemporary discussion of morals and ethical principles always tends to employ notions of moral codes and precepts with an extreme vagueness. The ancients talked about the *summum bonum* and at least knew the difference between the noble and the base, between virtue and vice. We don't always seem to possess that kind of perceptive conviction.

The crucial question regarding truth deals with our talk about God. For quite some time we have been exposed to such catchy phrases and by-words as propositional truth, existential truth, confrontational truth. The Barthian-Brunnerian-Bultmannian-Baillie contingent has declared the concept of propositional truth to be theological enemy No. 1. The proposition with which they zealously reject propositional truth reads: any theory of a body of divinely guaranteed truth is a product of intellectualism which results inevitably in a concept of faith which is little more than notional assent to given propositions. To speak of truth in terms of statements is to deny that God is truth and to fall into the heresy of the pride of knowledge. Truth is God acting-speaking-confronting; truth is God giving authentic existence in human self-discovery!

A crude theology of propositional truth (and some of it is crude) must, of course, be thoroughly rejected. God in revelation is much too dynamic to be boxed in statements—even piously orthodox and correct statements. But a crude existentialist and confrontationalist truth concept (and some of it is also crude) must

likewise to be rejected! If the former become hopelessly objective, the latter becomes hopelessly subjective. As Mill put it, truth is not merely "a creed learnt by heart;" but as Luther replied to Erasmus, nothing is more characteristic among Christians than assertions. "Take away assertions and you remove Christianity."

Truth is God. Insofar as it is "of God" truth is revelational, confrontational and existential; and propositional! Christianity is historical and propositions refer to historical events and their meaning. That Christ died for the ungodly is truth: historical, event, act, deed, truth. It is verbal truth; its meaning-in-itself is propositional. Genuine Christian faith does not merely assent to some speech sounds or exercise the intellect in admitting this or that particular bit of particular truth to its reservoir of facts. Faith grasps this "truth" when the living God speaks it confrontationally and kerygmatically; then truth becomes existential. But what modern theology must assert is so simple as almost to defy its stating. When that tremendous truth of God's act in Christ assumes existential status it has already possessed propositional status; because the God who acts and speaks and reveals it in his dynamic grace acted and spoke and revealed it! What theology does *not* need today are dogmatists who dogmatically cast out propositional truth because it is supposed to be contradictory to confrontational and existential truth. What theology *does* need is men willing to be dogmatic enough to hold on to theological truth in all its forms—especially when it is considered less than intellectually respectable to insist upon nothing less!

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