

1874

# The place of the Bible in theological study

---

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/47200>

*"Downloaded from OpenBU. Boston University's institutional repository."*

## The Place of the Bible in Theological Study

It may seem needless in our day & church, & presumptuous on the part of a student to discuss this theme; and yet the expression of honest convictions in proper ways is always right, & one of those convictions is that the theme does need discussion.

That this theme is opportune appears from three considerations; a) the importance of rightly dealing with the Bible, on any view of its value which is held by those who do not wholly or practically reject its divine authority; b) the fact that our own church is now in her formative period as to theological study; c) the new phase

which Evangelical Christianity  
is now taking, as evidenced by the  
history & results of the Evan-  
gelical Alliance.

(a) It was said above that  
this subject is worthy of thought  
even upon the lowest estimate  
of the Bible, which allows it  
any authoritative character  
as a divine revelation, — but  
we cannot treat it thus. To  
us the Bible, — aside from slight  
errors of manuscripts which  
thus far have never been found  
to cast doubt upon any vital  
teaching, — just as we have it  
is the very word of God; & every  
time we read it God speaks  
to us as truly & plainly as it  
anywhere describes Him as  
speaking in the days of voices  
& visions.

It is true, no doubt, no matter  
 what theory of inspiration we  
 hold, that God did inspire the  
 individualities of different men,  
 & that they <sup>in a measure</sup> were suitable to the  
 times & places in which they  
 wrote. It is also true, that  
 many of the things contained  
 in the Bible are such what  
 would commonly, if they were  
 found in any other book, be  
 termed religious teachings.  
 But after all these just al-  
 lowances have been made  
 it remains true that <sup>the</sup> reason  
 we estimate the Bible as  
 highly as we do, & the reason  
 of its wonderful vitality, univer-  
 sal interest, & commanding in-  
 fluence, is that it is the record  
 of what God has <sup>done</sup> ~~spoken~~ to  
 for <sup>the</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>salvation</sup> heart of universal

humanity.

Those last three words are of especial importance. It is not denied that God has spoken to man & still speaks things not recorded in the Bible; nor that He has done other things. But the fact cannot, it would seem, be disputed, that one small volume contains all <sup>things</sup> of that kind which God has thought it needful to put into a book & commit to the custody of His Church. When the dispensation what other like revelations will be needed & given, when the dispensation of which that church is the central earthly figure, <sup>shall be superseded</sup> we cannot

tell, & it would be idle for us  
 to speculate. To us this little  
 Book is the only infallible refer-  
 ence of historic facts con-  
 cerning Redemption as God's  
 plans unfolded in the ages  
 before "the fulness of time"; &  
 it is the fourfold record of the  
 Redeemer's life; & the statute  
 book of the Kingdom of heaven,  
 containing all that was need-  
 ful for future ages of those  
 utterances & doings of those  
 Apostles who form the founda-  
 tion of the Church of the  
 Redeemed. If this view be  
 correct then does it seem  
 that there is still one step to  
 be taken by those who are  
 above all things desirous to  
 know the truth. It was a  
 grand thing which the Re-

formation accomplished when  
it was established that no  
teaching of men is to be received  
by any one unless in a devout  
use of his own private judg-  
ment it is found to agree  
with God's teaching, as found  
in the Bible. Yet grand as  
is this postulate of Protestant  
faith, it would seem if un-  
der emphasized & narrowly  
held, or - as one might better  
say - if we do not progress  
in our thought a little farther,  
to be fruitful of most danger-  
ous & misleading prejudices  
& preconceptions, which will  
effectually bar our hearts &  
minds to the entrance of  
what is richest & sweetest in

the word of God. That such  
 has been the case the history  
 of theological controversy bears  
<sup>so</sup> abundant & ~~solid~~ testi-  
 mony. It has seemed to be  
 far too much the tendency  
 among theologians of all  
~~classes~~ schools & creeds to  
 combine with the teachings  
 they have received from  
 varied sources & which are  
 the result of the shifting cur-  
 rents of humane opinion in  
 all ages, their own thoughts,  
 & then go to the Bible to see  
 what can be found there to  
 sustain their peculiar ideas.  
 Thus the Bible becomes a theo-  
 logical doctrine-yard-stick, in-  
 stead of the fountain of living

waters of which if a man  
drink he shall never thirst.

This, then, is the advance step  
- to regard the Bible not  
merely as the store of doc-  
trine, but as the fountain  
of it. It may be said that  
this is no new thing, & in-  
deed it is not, for if so im-  
portant a principle were only  
now established it could not  
be true. But that is not the  
point. No doubt every theologian  
of evangelical faith would  
affirm this to be true, but  
the ~~practical~~ inquiry is,  
do we practically thus  
regard & use the Bible?  
b) This discussion is  
important because our  
own branch of the church  
is more & more coming to

demand a cultured ministry,  
 & the question forcibly presents  
 itself to the mind of one just  
 setting out in the ministry.  
 What should that culture be?  
 It is important for him personally,  
 but it is even more important  
 when we reflect that in a  
 generation the policy of our  
 Church in this regard will  
 be measurably settled, &  
 those who do not agree with  
 her method of culture will  
 be forced to seek culture  
 under other auspices.

It is evident that very  
 soon an end must be made  
 of the discord which now  
 exists between our old sys-  
 tem of conference examina-  
 tions, & the system of educa-  
 tion now found in our

Theological Schools. But it does not seem that a harmony can be produced by the victory of either in its present form, or by a compromise, or by the ~~assimilation~~ substitution of the School for the Conference. This latter is done in England but seems hardly practicable for us. Such a period of development + comparative confusion is the time to look more carefully at methods + curricula, with a view to the future.

(c) Still more, however, does this question press itself upon our attention if we consider the movement now in progress in Evan-

gical Christendom, & toward  
 which so many are hopefully  
 looking. It <sup>was a</sup> glorious scene  
 which our Metropolis wit-  
 nessed not long since, when  
 Christians of many diverse  
 creeds, nationalities, & tongues,  
 met to exalt the Lord Jesus  
 Christ & by the cultivation of  
 love the one for the other to  
 more effectually promote  
 the triumph of His Kingdom.  
 No dedication of costly  
 cathedrals, no preaching of  
 most eloquent sermons could  
 have so loudly spoken to the  
 heart & conscience of the un-  
 saved world as did that  
 gathering. The Senses com-  
 munion of universal hu-

manly repudiates the endless  
strife about words, which,  
while they may have reference  
to really important matters ab-  
stractly considered, bear no  
such relation to the purposes  
of Christ's mediatorial work  
as is proportionate to the  
attention given them.

Yet grand & hopeful as is  
this movement it cannot  
rest upon a basis of mere  
sentimentalism, if it is to  
be sweep on through coming  
ages with ever-increasing  
power, & not be the mere  
impulse of a generation, -  
one of the ever-recurring &  
ephemeral tides of human  
thought & feeling. It can-  
not find its true basis, either  
in a greater elaboration

of denominational symbols  
 or authorized teaching: all  
 experience teaches that the  
 tendency of this is to divide  
 what God ~~first~~ hath joined  
 together, to exalt the second-  
 ary to first rank, to divert  
 men's minds from the  
 central thought of the Gospel.  
 What other basis can be  
 sufficient except that upon  
 which they rested who  
 met in the little upper  
 room at Jerusalem? Then  
 with one accord we seek  
 the illumination of the  
 Holy Ghost upon our minds  
 & upon the written word  
 of God, then will our  
 different types of thought,  
 feeling, education, social  
 life, as well as the ~~various~~

languages of earth to speak  
as to make men understand  
& realize the presence of God  
in His church. No matter how  
learned or holy the man or  
men may be that framed  
a creed better men can  
never submit unqualified-  
ly to it without surrendering  
something of true manhood.  
But we can all do that  
now at the ~~altar~~ mercy  
seat upon which the flame  
of divine inspiration rests  
& feel that it is our proper  
place. Yet this we never  
can do so long as each  
man sits down before  
the Bible feeling that under  
his peculiar view is in

all respects confirmed some  
 great calamity will ensue. It  
 is neither the superstition of  
 traditional beliefs, nor the  
 blind credulity of so-called  
 rational free thought that is  
 here advocated, but a recog-  
 nition of the fact that if there  
 be a God & if He has spoken  
 to men in a Book, & if what  
 we call the Bible is that  
 Book, then our <sup>work</sup> ~~place~~ is to  
 humbly seek to know what  
 that Book teaches, not sup-  
 posing that our interpretation  
 is to be absolute authority  
 for any other man except  
 God shall enable him to  
 reach the same. When  
 Christendom shall reverently

kneel before the Book of God  
& with uplifted faith ask  
Him to show what amid  
all our necessary differences  
of thought & feeling is the  
eternal essential truth which  
is needed to make us  
wise unto salvation, then  
will Christian hearts be  
drawn together as never be-  
fore. Then will dividing  
walls sink down & heated  
polemics disappear as  
did those who in days  
of old offered strange fire  
before the Lord in the  
wilderness. Then, too, will  
it be seen that the differ-  
ences between us are  
really far fewer & less  
important than we had  
supposed. The title illustration

of the two boys who undertook to cross a snow-covered field in a straight line, well applies here. One boy fixed his gaze on a post at the other side; his comrade watched his own tracks. The former made a bee line across the field, while the latter's path was lamentably zigzag.

There is a subsidiary consideration which adds importance to this matter, & which it may be well to merely name here. This is the prominence which is being given in our time to the religious training of children, in the Sunday School especially. Demands of a peculiar kind are

now made upon the pastoral  
office, - demands to satisfy  
which only ~~are~~ thorough  
knowledge of the Scriptures  
is sufficient.

If these things be  
true it seems to follow that  
the Bible must be made the  
great text book of theological  
study; & that all the various  
disciplines comprehended  
in the cycle of theological  
sciences are to be studied  
under the inspiration of the  
thought that in them we  
are finding human hands  
stretched forth to guide  
us into the Holy Place  
of the Oracle of God. I  
desire that whoever may

read this essay, necessarily so  
 hastily written, would do me  
 the justice here to believe that  
 I am not indulging in a spirit  
 of fault-finding or seeking to  
 depreciate the good which I  
 have received, & far from <sup>it</sup>. These  
 are simply expressions of honest  
 convictions long cherished & of  
 a sincere desire to know the  
 truth.

Thus speaking, it does  
 seem that the Bible should be  
 made the subject matter of  
 study, the text-book far more  
 than it is. It would be unbecom-  
 ing to suggest a new cur-  
 riculum to such readers  
 as these words may have, but  
 if certainly does seem  
 that there should be more  
 Biblical introduction <sup>more</sup> study

of the laws of interpretation; lectures on the world's history at those points where it is plainly touched by the revealed history of redemption; exercises in the exegesis of connected passages & books; & to most of all, Biblical Theology. The personal experiences of the writer & his observation of others most pointedly suggest whether there should not be a sort of sub-science created, to be called Sacred Mnemonics, & to be included in Practical Theology.

When the mind has thus begun to grasp the Bible, not as a string of beads

upon which to father creeds,  
 but as a divine organism of  
 saving truth; when one begins  
 to see it in something of its  
 wonderful connection with  
 the life of humanity, — then  
 we are prepared to study a  
 creed or system of theology,  
 then we shall be able to dis-  
 entangle the mazes of doctrine  
 history, then are we ready  
 to discuss the fascinating  
 problems of Religious  
 Science. We seem to  
 begin too largely at the  
 wrong end. In what pre-  
 cise proportion & order these  
 various things should be  
 studied is best discussed  
 by practiced educators, <sup>it seems clear</sup> but

~~that~~

1 the Bible should be studied first  
2 that the thought of its transcendent place amid the world's literature should guide us both in teaching & in study.