

4. *The Bible as Building-Program*

I have come not to abolish the law or the prophets
but to fulfill them.

Matthew 5:17-20

Faith and the Bible

Over the past few centuries stock in the Bible has fallen sharply in price. Nevertheless, many people want to continue to believe in one way or another. After all, you have to keep the faith. This faith then attaches itself to a few, self-selected texts or sections from the Bible. Of course, the only authoritative passages are those which mean something to me. Can you force someone else to believe because another person says it is so or simply because it's there in the Bible? On this basis Biblical scholarship has come to stand critically over and against the Bible as a whole (the Canon) and over and against subsections of it in particular: Only those portions which can stand the scrutiny of our Biblical criticism are allowed to command any respect. From this same position dogmatic theology has distanced itself strongly from the historical confessions of the church: truth can only be truth when it's true to me, right? In the final analysis these developments declare the authority of the Bible as God's Word to be undone. "Faith" liberates itself from the Bible as God's book.

Living in the 20th Century, we ought to be struck by the fact that Jesus Himself upheld the whole Bible. He says: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets." His listeners might draw this quick conclusion because they did not understand why Jesus taught them with such divine authority. Does He intend to replace the law and the prophets with something else? Israel lived according to the Law of Moses and the Prophets of the Old Covenant. That was their Bible, which was referred to as "the law" or the "law and the prophets." Jesus' authority neither pushes out nor replaces that Bible. On the contrary! Although the Pharisees quickly insinuate that Jesus comes in the name of the devil, He himself never tires of showing the people how the Scriptures witness of Him: He holds fast to the Bible.

When Jesus searches out and accepts in love people who are living contrary to the Bible, like prostitutes, tax collectors and sinners, He leaves absolutely no room for misunderstanding: He orders them to cease their sinning. He does not cut any corners with the Bible of God. Faith in Jesus does not push the Bible into second place.

Jesus Himself puts the Bible into first place. He says: "I have come to fulfill the law." It is not the case that Jesus avoids any conflict with the law and prophets. Instead He is what they intended, He fills them up. Faith in Jesus then means that we also have to take the whole Bible seriously.

The Bible and history

But can you take a 2000-year-old book seriously as if it were current and modern in the 20th Century? Hasn't the progress of history turned the Bible into an outdated book from the world of yesterday? We might think in this way by forgetting that the Bible is genuinely a prophetic book. Since prophets inspired by heaven, are speaking, their words reach further than their own time. Yes, the Bible certainly comes from the day before yesterday, but it extends beyond the day after tomorrow.

Jesus presupposes this when He comes to fulfill the law and the prophets. In the book from ancient times the news is recorded which still has to take place and Jesus is coming to make it a reality. "Not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished." The letters will be transformed into events right down to the smallest details.

We could compare it to a building-program for history in which God builds an ideal world and does not abandon His plan even after our rebellion. It does, however, form a long route of stagnation and opposition. In this way the report about God's building plan and of its advancement also becomes longer and longer too. We pass Cain and the generation of the flood, the builders of the tower of Babel, the great apostasy in Israel and the sinful kings. When John the Baptist finally appears as the herald of the Messiah, we have not come any further than the call to conversion: repent! The history of the construction comprises above all a story about unending strikes and industrial sabotage. Nevertheless, God's plan continues to direct the progress. Then Jesus comes with a promise guaranteeing its completion: "I tell

you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen will by any means disappear from the law." The kingdom of heaven will one day come into view, and we can be very sure of it thanks to Jesus' oath. He takes it upon Himself to complete God's plan to bring this world back to the original Paradise. Not even a cosmic weapon of destruction can prevent that.

Many people view the Bible too statically. As if it was a still life. But the picture stirs and is moving towards a future. Much has already been fulfilled and translated into real life. The sacrificial laws have been fulfilled in Jesus who offered Himself as a complete atonement for our sins once and for all. Prophecy was fulfilled when He was like a lamb that is silent before its shearers. Many things from the law and prophets are no longer just the letter: they have become flesh in Jesus Christ. Other things still have to be fulfilled. The mountains have not yet brought any peace and the little hills righteousness, as the Psalmist promises. We may look forward to that. The Bible is a travel guide and we are already over the halfway mark. Thanks to Jesus a book from yesterday brings us to the time of tomorrow.

Bible and conversion

Jesus' work to make the Bible reality also has consequences for the reality of our own lives. He makes certain that the kingdom of heaven is coming. There people shall again become great. There they will rule with Christ and they will pass judgment, even over the angels. Only through Jesus are little, measly men able to make such a glorious appearance later. In order to become great in the kingdom of heaven, we must also be willing to become small with this Jesus who was crucified.

Only those who teach and do "these smallest commandments" will be called great in God's kingdom. The text does not say, as some translations suggest, "one of the least of these commandments." It says: "One of these smallest commandments." Jesus refers back to His own commandments just as He had given them in the Beatitudes: poor, humble, merciful, and willing to be persecuted. These are only small things compared to the assignments which are waiting for us in the kingdom of God. One only stands to lose by it. Faith is the single thing which we can win through it, and that treasure is the point of it all. We can enter God's kingdom alone through faith and that faith

becomes apparent when we take upon ourselves the small and inglorious commandments given by Jesus in the Beatitudes. Whoever considers that beneath him has no worth in the kingdom of heaven. But those who do that, will be called great.

The scribes and the pharisees instructed the people in the commandments of the law and the prophets. That was the right thing for them . But now Israel has to move on. They also have to add the commandments of Jesus to what they learned in the rabbinic school. Whoever goes no further than the rabbis, misses the Messiah and His law. Whoever believes in Jesus and takes up His smallest commandments, reaches the destination set out by the law and the prophets.

Faith is more than receiving and passing on Jesus' teaching; more than accepting the New Testament alongside the Old. Faith means that we "teach and do" these things. Jesus puts doing in the first place. We are inserted into His building program. There's no other way.

Building programs and specifications are really only interesting at building sites. In this way the Bible is not a pulp novel for commuters, but a guide to conversion for sinners. Jesus upholds this by binding the law, the prophets and His own commandments to our hearts. Anyone who keeps the Bible, whether whole or in part, outside his life and belief, will inevitably lose the channel on which God broadcasts.