

Cunningham's *Historical Theology*

My aim in drawing your attention to this book is to get you to read it! It has a very prosaic and unpretentious title, and when you find that it consists of two large volumes, totalling around 1,250 pages, you may not find it to be a very inviting prospect. But this is a book so relevant to our day and I want to show you why.

Historical Theology was first published in 1862. Almost 100 years later, in 1960, the newly established Banner of Truth Trust reprinted it as one of the first two books in its series, the Students' Reformed Theological Library. Iain Murray wrote a 22 page biographical introduction seeking to show why this was such an important book to bring back into circulation for the Christian public.

What is so special about William Cunningham (1805-1861)?

His contemporaries showered accolades upon him, under God. J. J. Bonar in his Preface to Cunningham's *Sermons* (1872) unequivocally calls him, 'a Great Man who lived a Great Life', and this was in an era when there were many bright stars in Scotland. Iain Murray, with the hindsight of a century, went so far as to write in his biographical introduction: Cunningham was "... one of strongest and noblest sons of Scotland and one of the most illustrious divines that has ever lived since the days of the apostle Paul" (p. xx)! His exceptional abilities were evident as early as his student days. "Nothing could exhaust his enormous appetite for study and he was never satisfied with a superficial view of any subject" (ibid p. viii). In debate and controversy his biographers record his speech was, "Fraught with varied information, closely argumentative in its style, sharp in repartee, terrible in invective, merciless in its exposure of fallacies, and yet translucently clear in expression, without any flowers of rhetoric – " (Rainy and Mackenzie, p. 40). It is these characteristics that underlie the great value of his *Historical Theology*. His great ability was "to seize leading principles and to state the essential points of difference between opposing systems of thought" (Murray, p. xxi).

In 1847 Cunningham became the Principal of the newly formed Free Church College. Murray claims that it rose to be finest theological college in Europe, and that this was due in such large measure to Cunningham.

He was also a great preacher. Bonar considered that, except for the sermons of Jonathan Edwards, there are no sermons more eminently fitted to strike, wound, then heal the heart (p. xxx). His preaching surpassed his great reputation for argumentative skill, boundless reading, and intellectual prowess. And it had the same characteristics as his theological lectures, unadorned, to the point, rigorous, direct.

What is so special about Cunningham's *Historical Theology*?

He occupied the chair of Church History and had very special views of the way it should be taught. He believed it must specifically contribute to its *theological* education, and not just narrate various events in the history of the church. Therefore he dealt only with the history of **doctrine**. Even then he was not content simply to ask, 'What was believed at different times in church history?' Cunningham was above all concerned with the most practical and ultimate question, 'What is true?' "The benefit to be derived from this method depends on compression and compendious handling; everything falls away excepting this question, ... What was truly in debate? What was the real argument in the case? ... And what was it all

worth when summed and sifted?” Rainy and Mackenzie in their day claim they knew of no comparable work (p. 230). One hundred years later Murray laments that still nothing that even approximates to Cunningham’s work in value had been written (p. xxii).

As he surveys the history of doctrine he fully deals with the three main systems of error, Romanism, Socinianism and Arminianism. They remain powerful alternatives to a truly Biblical faith up to the present time. This means that Cunningham’s *Historical Theology* has by no means lost its relevance for us. If we believe, as Cunningham did, that the great doctrines of the Faith had been established by God’s people, then Cunningham will greatly help us to understand the central issues involved, so that we can continue to stand firm today. We do not need to ‘reinvent the wheel’ for the new teachings are only the old heresies in new dress.

I bought *Historical Theology* in 1971 when I started Seminary. But it was not until 1978 when I started to study the 2 volumes seriously and systematically, as I began a life-time ministry of church planting based in Nairobi, Kenya. At the beginning of my ministry I had a practice of an hour’s study after lunch in one particular aspect of theology. For church history I chose Cunningham and found that it complemented my love for Systematic Theology. It gave me an appreciation for church history as being much more than events and biographies, as edifying as these can be. In the context of what I was seeking to do in Kenya, to plant a Biblical, that is, a reformed Church, church history as Cunningham presented it was more a struggle for what is the very foundation of the church, the purity of doctrine.

Early on in my ministry in Nairobi I began to train pastors and sought to introduce them to Cunningham. Despite some difficulties with the Victorian style for those who have English as their second language, I felt that Cunningham, in centring on the real issues at stake, was second to none in his presentation of certain aspects of theology. I included about 400 pages of required reading in both systematic theology and church history units. One of my most recent students has this to comment about Cunningham.

I particularly love that common thread holding Cunningham’s *Historical Theology* together: ‘God has always had a church on earth, a remnant. She has been threatened with extinction, buffeted by oppression and cruelty, yet true to her Master’s words, the gates of hell have not prevailed against her. Her footprints have indelibly remained upon the sands of time.’

Cunningham on the Trinity

The first great controversy in the Early Church was on the doctrine of the Trinity out of which came the Nicene Creed. Cunningham deals so helpfully with a very complex subject in 40 pages (1:267-306).

(1) First, Cunningham deals with the testimony of the early church to the doctrine of the Trinity. He concludes that, “the testimony of the church of the first three centuries in favour of the doctrine concerning the Trinity ... is sufficiently clear and full” (1:272). There were three divisions of anti-Trinitarians, the Sabellians, the Socinians, and the Arians.

- Sabellians agree that a distinction in the Godhead is set forth in the Scriptures but deny that the distinction is a personal one. No one alleges that this was the prevailing view in the early church.
- Nor was Socinianism prevailing, the view that Christ was a mere man, because the unanimous testimony is of the pre-existence of Christ before He was born of Mary.

- Arians admit Christ's pre-existence but deny His full deity as equal with the Father. Cunningham says that although some of the fathers of the early church did not always write clearly or consistently so that they could appear to be Arian, the great body of the fathers assert the full deity of the Saviour.

Cunningham has adopted his usual method here of standing back from all the mass of details by isolating the 3 differing false views on the Trinity, dealing with them one by one, and only bringing in details as illustrate the case in point.

(2) Second, Cunningham deals with the language of the Nicene Creed that seeks to express the equality of the Son with the Father, that the Son is 'consubstantial' with the Father. He is not simply 'of the same substance' but "of one and the same substance", as opposed to any created being. He asks if this is Biblical, seeing that the precise language is not found in the Bible. He writes that it is a necessary deduction from the fact that the names, titles, attributes, and works of the one supreme God are given to the Son; and because God will not give His glory to another the Son must possess the one and same nature as the Father. He has occasion to point out that it is this very process "by which our whole system of theological opinions ought to be formed" (1:284). Cunningham very helpfully not only gives the results of his thinking, but the process of getting there. He asks one further question, whether it was wise that the language of consubstantiality was made a test of orthodoxy. In answering this question he re-emphasizes that in our theological formulations it is often necessary to go beyond the language of Scripture. This is because opposite doctrines have been deduced from the very same words. It was precisely this word translated consubstantial that effectively shut out the Arians for none of them would confess it. He concludes, "I do not know that the history of the church presents to us another instance in which the wisdom and expediency of any particular doctrinal deliverance have been so fully established by experience" (1:290).

(3) Third, Cunningham considers the "personal properties" of the Father, the Son and the Spirit, that is, what distinguishes the three Persons from one another. The peculiar property of the Son is "eternal Sonship" or "filiation" or "eternal generation". He believes that those who reject this teaching do so because they assume that 'generation' is the same as applied to men, which is rejected by all who defend the teaching. The language of Scripture refers to a Sonship which is more than an office, that is, to His eternal relation with the Father. The distinguishing personal property of the Spirit is that He "proceeds" from the Father and the Son.

Conclusions. The doctrine of the Trinity continues to be attacked in many quarters. How clearly he summarizes the long drawn out discussion in the Early Church emphasizing that the truth of the doctrine was firmly established. He then so simply presents the doctrine in only two parts, the sense in which the three Persons of the Trinity are equal, and how they are to be distinguished from each other. Cunningham's ability to present the basic issues involved in a controversy, by which alone we can be sure of the truth, is what made his public disputation so powerful, and make his writings so valuable. One Member of Parliament said that in debate, "There is no man in the House that approaches Cunningham" (Rainy and Mackenzie, p. 480).

Cunningham on the Bondage of the Will

There is a very helpful 25 pages on answering the objections raised concerning the total inability of sinful man to do anything spiritually good (1:588-613). As is characteristic of him, and we must remember he is writing *Historical* and not *Systematic* Theology, he takes us back to basics and does not get lost in detail. He first notes that the basic objection is not from any specific statement of Scripture to the effect that fallen man does possess such ability. Rather the objection is an inference from what they consider to be a general principle of Scripture, 'Responsibility implies ability.' This principle has two parts:

- God could not have addressed such commands to men unless they were able to obey them (1:589).
- An ability to obey is necessary in order for there to be true responsibility (1:590).

Before giving answers Cunningham stresses that there is conclusive evidence from Scripture for the fact of the Bondage of the Will. The objectors can only produce general reasonings, so the true state of the argument is: "Is there anything in the general reasonings of the objectors above stated, that is so clearly and certainly *both* true and relevant, as to warrant us, on that ground alone, - *for there is no other*, - summarily to reject this evidence, or to resolve at all hazards to explain it away?" (1:590). Such clear statements as to what the central arguments are makes Cunningham's *Historical Theology* a work of such great value. He puts aside so much discussion to get to the heart of the matter.

For the first part of the objection he takes the objectors to task for asserting that God could not have any good reasons for commanding men if they were unable to obey. This is tantamount to claiming to judge all the reasons why God should do something. As regards the moral law, man was able to obey as created and his fall does not invalidate his obligation. Rather it is necessary that God continues to press the demands of his law on His creatures in order to convict them of their fallenness. As regards the commands to repent and believe for salvation, a knowledge of inability is designed to make sinners seek the grace of God, and is the instrumentality through which God imparts His strength.

Cunningham regards the second part of the objection as the real difficulty. It is one thing to state that God does command men to do what they are not able to do. But how can God hold men *responsible* for what they are not able to do? Moral responsibility is a given as it is Scriptural. Inability is likewise plainly and explicitly taught. Cunningham proceeds to evaluate the common explanation which distinguishes between natural and moral inability, and finds it doubtful (1:602-605). He then puts forward the doctrine of the imputation of Adam's first sin to all his progeny as a more satisfactory explanation. Man "is answerable for that inability itself, having, as legally responsible for Adam's sin, inherited the inability, as part of the forfeiture penally due to the first transgression" (1:610).

Conclusions. This example of dealing with objections to an established doctrine by showing where the real problems lie is the unparalleled strength of Cunningham's presentation. He clears away 'straw men', exposes fallacies and points to the real issue that he then deals with.

Value of Cunningham for Today

I commend a study of Cunningham's *Historical Theology* to you. In his day he was renowned, not only as a theologian, but also as a debater and preacher. His style is therefore far more than presenting compendious information. By careful argumentation he

wants you to be persuaded of the truth. He does not deal with minute, extraneous issues of theology, but with the basic truths of the faith upon which our eternal welfare depends, those which have been hammered out in the course of history on the anvil of controversy. There is no better writing to make you grounded in the fundamental truths of the Christian faith: the Trinity, the Person of our Saviour, the terrible effects of sin, what the death of Christ accomplished, and how salvation is applied to the individual.