1-1-2000

Robert Milligan: Teacher, Theologian, Minister

Thomas H. Olbricht

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven

Part of the Biblical Studies Commons, Christianity Commons, and the Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol8/iss3/12

This Biography is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized administrator of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact Kevin.Miller3@pepperdine.edu.
ROBERT MILLIGAN: 
Teacher, Theologian, Minister

by Thomas H. Olbricht

Robert Milligan was an influential thinker in the Stone-Campbell-Scott movement, and his legacy lingers even to this day. Milligan was well trained in Greek and Hebrew, as were most college graduates of his time, and also in the literature of ancient Greece and Rome. He was without formal training in either theology or the Bible, but he had the tools necessary to pursue these studies on his own. Milligan was convinced that scripture was the principal source for insight into God and the universe, as well as into religious practices, ethics, and morals. He remained steadfast in these convictions even though he was immersed in the intellectual life of his times. He believed that contemporary views were by no means superior to those found in scripture. He set out to establish that the faith and life set forth in scripture should not take a back seat to any other way of thinking and living. In that sense he was a theologian, that is, one who assisted the believers of his time in understanding and living out faith in their specific context. By profession, Milligan was a college professor, and a proclaimer of the gospel as the occasion arose. He was also an author, and in his books he energetically focused upon reasons for believing in the God of the scriptures and upon setting out the contours of life in him. Milligan was strongly convinced that every believer should understand his or her faith, becoming as able a theologian as possible; he published his thoughts so as to assist believers in that endeavor.

Important Writings

Milligan is perhaps best remembered for his important work *An Exposition and Defense of the Scheme of Redemption, As It Is Revealed and Taught in the Holy Scriptures.* This book is still in print and has been employed in college and graduate school classes in the more conservative wings of the Stone-Campbell-Scott movement. It is, in effect, a biblical theology, moving from the Old Testament into the New. Prior to *The Scheme of Redemption,* Milligan published *Reason and Revelation: or, The Province of Reason in Matters Pertaining to Divine Revelation Defined and Illustrated; and the Paramount Authority of the Holy Scriptures Vindicated.* He was also renowned for his commentary on the book of Hebrews.

A Short Biography

Robert Milligan was born in Tyrone, Ireland, on July 25, 1814. In 1818 his parents, John and Margaret Milligan, migrated with their children to the United States and settled in Trumbull County, Ohio, not far from Youngstown. An injury to his chest, which he received while helping clear a
field on his father's farm and the
mark of which he bore until his
death, turned his thoughts to-
ward a life in education and
ministry.

In 1831 Milligan entered
Zelienople Academy, in Beaver
County, Pennsylvania; in 1833 he
entered a classical academy,
conducted by a graduate of the
University of Edinburgh, at
Jamestown in the same state. As
one of nine children, he needed to
seek a livelihood before he fin-
ished his education. In that time,
since there were no publicly
supported schools (except, begin-
inning in 1827, in Massachusetts),
elementary and secondary educa-
tion was available only when
someone who felt qualified
opened a school. In 1837 Milligan
established a school at Flat Rock,
in Bourbon County, Kentucky,
with fifteen pupils. Flat Rock was
not far from Cane Ridge, where
Barton W. Stone had served as a
minister. (Stone had moved from
Lexington to Jacksonville, Illinois,
in 1834.) Milligan's school at-
tracted so many students that
after three months he refused to
admit more than fifty, on the
ground that he could not do
justice to more than that number.

At age twenty-one Milligan
became a member of the Associ-
ate Presbyterian Church, in
which his father was a ruling
elder. The first-generation Associ-
ate Presbyterian Church in
America was composed of Scot-
tish immigrants of Seceder
Presbyterian backgrounds. After
a careful study in his Greek New
Testament during his stay at Flat
Rock, Milligan decided that New
Testament baptism was immer-
sion administered to believing
adults, and on March 11, 1838, he
was immersed into Christ by
John Irvin, of the Church of
Christ at Cane Ridge, Kentucky.

In 1839 Milligan determined
to complete his college education.
He left Kentucky with the inten-
tion of entering Yale College. His
journey over the National Road
took him to Washington, Pennsyl-
vania. There, on the Lord's day,
he attended a congregation
whose roots went back to the
efforts of Thomas Campbell,
when he had arrived in America.
Milligan decided to attend Wash-
ington College (now Washington
and Jefferson) and worship with
the small congregation of dis-
ciples in the neighboring village
of Martinsburg, preaching and
supplying leadership as called
upon. He graduated in 1840 with
a bachelor of arts degree. So
impressed was the faculty with
Milligan's ability that he was
appointed professor of English
language and literature. He
continued in that position for the
next ten years, acquiring consid-
erable insight into the master-
pieces of English literature.
During that time he also occa-
sionally taught Greek and Latin
classics.

In 1842 he married Ellen
Blaine Russell, of Washington,
whose father (and later, one of
whose brothers) represented the
Bedford (Pa.) district in Congress.
In 1843 Professor Milligan at-
tained the master of arts degree
from Washington College. In 1844
he was ordained a minister, with
Thomas Campbell presiding. He
preached with some regularity
for the rest of his life, but not as
the minister of a specific congre-
gation. In 1849 or 1850 he trans-
ferred to the department of
chemistry and natural history at
Washington College. In 1852 the
college was placed under the
control of the Presbyterian Synod
of Wheeling, and Milligan re-
signed.

Almost immediately Milligan
was invited to Indiana University
at Bloomington and appointed to
the chair of mathematics. After
that he served as professor of
chemistry, natural philosophy,
and astronomy. The university
offered him the honorary degree
doctor of divinity, but he de-
clined. In 1854 he resigned his
professorship at Bloomington
because of the ill health of his
son; he later accepted the chair of
mathematics and astronomy at
Bethany College, which was then
in Virginia. Bethany was founded
in 1840 by Alexander Campbell,
who was president when
Milligan was appointed. In
addition to his academic respon-
sibilities, Milligan served as an
elder of the church at Bethany
and for three years, beginning in
1857, as a co-editor (with
Alexander Campbell, W. K.
Pendleton, and Robert
Richardson) of the Millennial
Harbinger, which Campbell
founded in 1830.

In May of 1857, Milligan was
elected president of Bacon Col-
lege at Harrodsburg, Kentucky,
 founded in 1836 with Walter Scott
Milligan mustered his evidence from a wide range of sources, both ancient and contemporary.

Milligan mustered his evidence from a wide range of sources, both ancient and contemporary.

prone to trust; and to help, it may be in a very humble way, to restore the Bible to its proper position, as the only safe and all-authoritative rule of faith and practice.\footnote{4}

For Milligan, reason functioned mainly to weigh and sift evidence. Such effort, he suggested, may result in probable conclusions, or sufficient and satisfactory conclusions, but in cases in which the evidence is conclusive or demonstrative, then certain conclusions.\footnote{5} In Revelation and Reason, Milligan was mainly concerned with advancing sufficient and satisfactory evidence for the divine nature and origin of scripture, as well as its canonization, interpretation, inspiration, and employment.

Milligan mustered his evidence from a wide range of sources, both ancient and contemporary. He was aware of recent developments in both church history and biblical studies, both critical and apologetic. To establish the superiority of biblical morality over that of other ancients, he referred to the views of the Cynics, Cyrenaics, Epicureans, Peripatetics, and Stoics, and those of Confucius, Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, Cicero, Bacchus, Venus, Pan, Ceres, Flora and Kotis.\footnote{6} In order to rebut contemporary views in regard to the divinity of Christ, he denounced the positions of the German David Strauss (1808–1874) and, especially, those of Ernest Renan (1823–1892) of Paris. He pointed out that Strauss, along with other German rationalists, rejected the miracles. Renan, Milligan reported, did not go that far, but did deny that evidence can be found that a miracle ever occurred. Renan believed that the gospels are basically reliable, but that their reports of miracles are exaggerations. In refutation, Milligan pointed out that (1) the miracles are embedded in the narratives that Renan admitted to be authentic and (2) it is impossible to separate the natural from the supernatural. Even Renan recognized Jesus as an extraordinary person because he was selfless, he was free from Jewish prejudices and worldly ambition, he spoke on many important topics with no preparation, and he lived up to high moral standards. Jesus himself was therefore a miracle even if there were no other.\footnote{7}

In regard to the formation of the canon of both the Old and New Testaments, Milligan referred to works of some of the recognized scholars of his time, such as Thomas Hartwell Horne (1780–1862), John Kitto (1804–
At the end of *Reason and Revelation*, Milligan argued that through reading the scriptures, both philosophers and children can pick up on certain facts: (1) that God has existed from eternity; (2) that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the one God; (3) that God created from nothing; (4) that God worked miracles; (5) that all persons are by nature children of wrath; (6) that since Adam, all persons are sinners; (7) that because of Christ all are just; (8) that all persons are saved through faith and obedience; (9) that the Holy Spirit dwells in the hearts of all children of God; (10) that spirits of humans without bodies are conscious between their deaths and the resurrection; (11) that the spirits of the wicked are in misery; (12) that the bodies of both saints and sinners will be raised and joined to their spirits; and (13) that after judgment the state of the righteous and wicked will remain the same for eternity. Milligan did not elaborate. These topics comprise, in effect, the rubrics of traditional systematic theology.

**The Scheme of Redemption**

The most significant and influential work of Milligan was his *Scheme of Redemption*. This book is his fullest statement of Christian theology, or, more properly in Milligan’s case, the theology of the Bible. *The Scheme of Redemption*, however, is not organized according to the above thirteen topics; it proceeds in canonical order from Genesis to Revelation and therefore unfolds historically. Milligan declared that God is one and that the scheme of redemption is therefore one. The object of scripture is the presentation of a grand unified account of God’s work among humans. Milligan wrote about the book in the introduction: “The Scheme of Redemption was not just for preachers, or preachers in prospect, but for all believers.”

Those who questioned the authenticity and integrity of the scriptures; he countered their conclusions with those of other scholars who supplied the factual details he needed to support his case. In a sense his theology was apologetic theology, but then every Christian theology has an apologetic dimension in that it is designed to explain and set out the ground for Christian faith and life for the time in which it is written.
Milligan believed that *The Scheme of Redemption* was not just for preachers, or preachers in prospect, but for all believers. After discussing the possible use of the work in colleges and seminaries, Milligan wrote: “But the work is also intended to serve as a help to the study and comprehension of the Bible in the Family, in the Sunday School, and in the Bible-Class.” Every believer should therefore in some sense be a theologian.

Milligan perceived the earliest events in Genesis as unfolding the plight of humans, moving from paradise to disobedience to punishment, and then to ultimate redemption through Christ. While these early events prefigured fulfillment in Christ and were a type of what was to come, I think Milligan nevertheless recognized the importance and weight of these earlier humans in themselves as actors in the unfolding drama. Milligan declared that the universe has been known to God from eternity and that every event—past, present, and future—is “a part of the one predetermined and harmonious plan.” God created the universe, he believed, from the perspective of the various wants of humans. God foresaw that humans would sin and become mortal and, therefore, that Eden was only a temporary dwelling place for humans. The penalty for disobedience is separation from God and therefore death. Milligan understood that the gospel, that is, what God did in Christ, is remedy and must be received into the hearts of sinners. The gospel is to be proclaimed by faithful ministers of the word. Milligan ended this section with an observation that is as germane now as it was a hundred twenty-five years ago:

If it may be well, also, to remember, that while many so-called preachers of the Gospel are wrangling about theories and questions that serve to gender strife and malice rather than practical goodness, *thousands for whom Christ died are going to perdition.*

In his long section on the church, Milligan discussed with considerable detail and theological insight, always drawing upon the scriptures, redemption as developed in and through the church; the various ministries and offices in the church; the Christian ordinances having to do with preaching, prayer, praise, fasting, baptism, the Lord’s day, and the Lord’s Supper; the members of the church and their duties; the cooperation of churches; the conversion of the world; the edification of the church; and the fortunes and destiny of the church, that is, eschatology. Near the end of the book, Milligan affirmed once again his conviction that every believer is a responsible theologian:

Christianity is a power, and its influence must be aggressive. We dare not, if we would, avoid doing every thing that we can, individually, socially, and collectively, for the edification of the Church and the salvation of the world. . . . Let every man be taught to tremble at the Word of the Lord. . . . Let them act in harmony with its precepts in their families, in their respective congregations, and in the assembly met for the purpose of considering the wants of the Churches in any given district, state, or territory, and then all will be well. Their own hearts will then be filled with love to God, and with an ardent sympathy for our race, while the world will look on and exclaim, “Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity.”

Thomas H. Olbricht, a noted Stone-Campbell historian, is Distinguished Professor Emeritus, Pepperdine University. Dr. Olbricht resides in South Berwick, Maine.

Bibliography
