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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*.¹ 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*.² He was also renowned for his commentary on the book of Hebrews.³

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 toward a life in education and ministry.

In 1831 Milligan entered Zelenople 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 finished his education. In that time, since there were no publicly supported schools (except, beginning in 1827, in Massachusetts), elementary and secondary education 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 attracted 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 Associate Presbyterian Church, in which his father was a ruling elder. The first-generation Associate Presbyterian Church in America was composed of Scottish 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 immersion 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 intention of entering Yale College. His journey over the National Road took him to Washington, Pennsylvania. 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 Washington College (now Washington and Jefferson) and worship with the small congregation of disciples 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 considerable insight into the masterpieces of English literature. During that time he also occasionally 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 attained 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 congregation. In 1849 or 1850 he transferred 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 resigned.

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 declined. 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 responsibilities, 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 College at Harrodsburg, Kentucky, founded in 1836 with Walter Scott

as the first president. Before Milligan was inaugurated, the name was changed to Kentucky University; the school later merged with Transylvania University. Milligan took office on Wednesday, September 21, 1859. In 1864, because of the burning down of the main building, the university relocated in Lexington. The next year, as the result of the merger, the university was reorganized, and Milligan became presiding officer of the College of the Bible and professor of sacred literature. His colleagues in the College of the Bible were J. W. McGarvey and W. T. Moore. Milligan continued in this role until his death. He died peacefully, in full possession of his faculties, and surrounded in his home by his family and friends, on March 20, 1875.

Milligan as a Theologian

Two premises underlie the theology of Robert Milligan. The first is that reason is important in theological deliberation, though not to the exclusion of feeling and activity; the second, that scripture is the fundamental resource for all theological conclusions. He wrote:

I wish, as far as possible, to enlighten the popular understanding; to assign to Reason her proper province; and to arouse to a sense of feeling and activity, the slumbering conscience. In this way, and by these means, I hope to sweep away some of the false refuges in which men are

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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.*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.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.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.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–

1854), Moses Stuart (1780–1852), Johann Lorenz Mosheim (1694–1755), J. A. W. Neander (1789–1850), Philip Schaff (1819–1893), J. C. L. Giesler (1792–1854), Nathaniel Lardner (1684–1768), Samuel Davidson (1806–1898), Humphrey Prideaux (1648–1724), and L. F. C. von Tischendorf (1815–1874), as well as several other scholars. From these scholars Milligan reported data on historical developments and Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible. Milligan did not ignore

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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.

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.⁸ 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:

Its primary, general, and ultimate object is to develop one great and glorious System of Divine wisdom, justice, goodness, mercy, and love, though Jesus Christ, for the redemption of fallen man. But, nevertheless, like nature, it has its parts; its subordinate ends and purposes; its wheels within wheels; and its systems within systems—all of which, to be perfectly understood, must be considered in their relations to each other, and to the whole system of which they are but parts.⁹

In the first two hundred pages of *The Scheme of Redemption*, Milligan told the story of human purity, disobedience, and the prospect of redemption as found in the Torah (that is, the Pentateuch). In the next eighty pages, he reported on the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, and the conversion of the first Christians. In the last almost three hundred pages (285–577), he developed the doctrine of the church in its various aspects and manifestations. From this, one can conclude that for Milligan the paramount topic of Christian theology was salvation, but that, while the doctrine of the church is subsumed under salvation, life in the church was for him salvation's critical aspect.

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."¹⁰ 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."¹¹ 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.¹² Milligan ended this section with an observation that is as germane now as it was a hundred twenty-five years ago:

[I]t 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.*¹³

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. . . . [L]et 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."¹⁴

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(Continued on p. 143)