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The Emergence of a Neo-Orthodox Voice

No I am not a Barthian but Barth did two things for me, he drove me back to the Bible and to my old teacher James Denney.
—Walter Bryden

In his inaugural lecture on installation as principal of Knox College in October 1945, Walter Bryden referred to the resentment which had been aroused because "a certain challenging theology of the day" had been addressing the Church, Christians and people in terms that seemed "to diminish the significance of human personality and accomplishments."[1] By the end of World War II the theology of Karl Barth and the influence of the Barthian movement were well-known, and Walter Bryden had come to be regarded as one of the ablest and most articulate neo-orthodox voices in Canadian Protestantism. Students from the late 1920s and the 1930s recalled a provocative, polemical, prophetic type of teacher who was among the first church leaders in North America to see the significance of Barth. By the mid-1940s Bryden had become a senior theological statesman within the Presbyterian Church in Canada and to the extent that there was any serious theological discussion, the neo-orthodox position to which he gave voice tended to dominate the discourse of the denomination.

Bryden was nervous about theological labels, and he denied he was a Barthian as such. Indeed, his students argued that "he came through to his basic theological position on his own" hammering out the truth in "the forge of his own soul, in terms of his own flesh and blood struggle for faith."[2] Nevertheless, they also remembered that Bryden almost always quoted Barth

[1] Bryden, "The Church of God and the World," in *Separated Unto the Gospel*, 46.
[2] Donald V. Wade, "The Theological Achievement of Walter Bryden," unpublished paper presented to the Karl Barth Society of North America, 1974, 6.

approvingly, defended Barth against his critics, and sought to work out the implications of the continental theological renewal associated with Barth's name for Canadian churches. Bryden's students also insisted that he was neither a slavish nor uncritical interpreter of Barth's theology, and that he seemed fully sensitive to "the fact that Canada was not Europe, and transplants, theological or otherwise, were not wholly appropriate."[3] At the same time, what Bryden said in the 1930s and 1940s sounded strangely new and offensive to Canadian Protestants. It came as a word from beyond their situation, and it landed with great force on their ecclesial landscape. And that was largely due to Bryden's discovery of the theological protest in Barth's early theology. The more he read Barth's theology, the more Bryden came to see that Barth's formal theological method and his material interpretation of the Reformed tradition offered a way beyond idealism and rationalism. Barth's early theology confirmed and widened the grasp of biblical and reformed principles which had already been forming in Bryden's mind, and it gave him the categories to articulate with a fresh, strong voice the central themes of Presbyterian theology. This made him, at least in the eyes of his students, a rather rare person, an original Canadian theologian who sought to address the peculiarities of the Canadian scene in light of the new insights of European theology.[4]

The emergence of Bryden's mature theological voice on behalf of a neo-orthodox protest within Canadian Protestantism, however, did not take place overnight. It was forged in the fires of almost seventeen years of pastoral ministry, developed behind the lectern of a classroom in a theological college for two decades, and then used to exercise leadership for seven years as a college principal. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the emergence, development, and dominance of that theological voice within the Presbyterian sphere of Canadian Protestantism.

Presbyterian Minister, 1909–1926

Socialism, Idealism, and the Great War

After returning to Canada to complete his final year of theological study, Walter Bryden was ordained and appointed to be the minister of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Lethbridge, Alberta, a ministry that he later referred to as "spade work in Western Canada" because it involved establishing a new congregation in the north part of town, an extension of Knox Presbyterian

[3] J. Charles Hay, "Allan Farris," in *The Tide of Time,* edited by John Moir (Toronto: Knox College, 1978), 16.
[4] Ibid.

Church.[5] During the late nineteenth century the Western Canadian frontier had emerged as an important missionary field for Canadian Presbyterians. Ralph Connor's early novels had romanticized the late Victorian missionaries who were able to overcome great hardships and challenges and successfully evangelize because of tremendous faith and unwavering dedication. James Robertson, the superintendent of missions for the Presbyterian Church in Canada, almost single-handedly established the presence of the Presbyterian Church in Manitoba and beyond. The missionaries of Connor's early novels embodied the Calvinist doctrine and evangelical piety represented by Robertson. They were evangelists and revivalists who encouraged people to profess faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord in order to be received into the church. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, confidence in the value of the Western evangelistic missionary effort had begun to fade. Inadequate financial support accompanied by the influence of progressive Calvinism reoriented the churches toward the ideals of ecumenical cooperation and social Christianity.[6] It was this expression of Christianity that Bryden encountered in his first pastoral ministry in Western Canada.

In the early years the congregation which Bryden helped establish met in Redding's Hall and the Bailey Street School, but by 1911 construction of the first church building was undertaken with voluntary labor.[7] Lethbridge was a mining town and Bryden soon came to know the struggle of coal-miners for fair wages and safe working conditions. Many years later Donald Wade noted that Bryden's "experiences among the coal-miners of the west remind one of Reinhold Niebuhr's experiences in Detroit."[8] Another parallel, however, perhaps stronger, is to be found between Bryden's experience and Barth's involvement in the socialist movement during the years of his Safenwil pastorate (1911–21). Recent Barth scholarship has noted that Barth's theology was concerned for responsible action in the world and characterized by a commitment to democratic socialism. Refusing to divorce theology from ethics, Barth's early article "Jesus Christ and the Movement for Social Justice" set out the rationale for his vocal criticism of child labor and exploitative capitalism. At the beginning of his ministry Barth had worked to arouse the social conscience of the church on behalf of the workers, and saw democratic socialism as an ally. Following the outbreak of World War One, however, he feared the nationalist tendencies and narrow interests of the social democratic movement and developed a radical critique of Marxist-Leninist doctrine, arguing

[5] Bryden, *Separated Unto the Gospel*, 131.

[6] David B. Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith,* 99–126.

[7] William Hay, *History of the Presbyterian Church in Lethbridge*, Presbyterian Church Archives.

[8] Donald Wade, "The Theological Achievement of Walter Bryden," 3.

not that it was too radical but that it was not radical enough. The Christian, Barth contended, was engaged in permanent revolution while Leninism simply substituted one form of an oppressive state for another. Nevertheless, as Martin Rumscheidt has noted, Barth believed that a socialist *may* be a Christian, but that a Christian *should* be a socialist.[9]

Bryden's southwestern Ontario roots had already made him deeply sensitive to the exploitation of the working class by the family compact system, so it was no surprise that Bryden, like Barth, supported local efforts to organize the labor movement. In particular the young Canadian minister learned about the activities of the Industrial Workers of the World and the Western Miner's Federation, confessing later to his students that he learned a great deal about the meaning of the New Testament from the Marxist miners of Lethbridge. Bryden could see that the church in Canada had not only allowed itself to be used as a tool for exploitation, but that it had actually contributed to the creation of an entire system of oppression. The effective criticism of society, he concluded, began with the criticism of Christianity. Bryden stopped short, however, of embracing the increasingly popular Social Gospel, primarily because it seemed to him to reflect the progressive ideals against which he struggled.[10] On the one hand, he argued later, "a mere social gospel is never the Christian gospel, and the Kingdom of God is not to be equated with advances in social readjustment."[11] At the same time, his experience in Lethbridge made him merciless in his criticism of monopolistic capitalism: "The sober fact is that nothing has ever appeared among men which has been more cynically regardless of any ethic worth the name than the ruthless, competitive economic system which is known as Capitalism."[12] Capitalism, Bryden believed, despoiled the original intention of democracy and tended to secularize the Christian faith by making the success of the church dependent upon a consumer society. There was not a little truth in the statement, he believed, "that democracy as it exists in a capitalist society represents the best form of government ever devised for a privileged ruling class to exploit the

[9] H.-Martin Rumscheidt has been responsible for making the theology of Karl Barth more widely known in Canada. See, for example, H.-Martin Rumscheidt, editor, *Karl Barth in Re-View: Posthumous Works Reviewed and Assessed,* Pittsburgh Theological Monograph Series 30 (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1981).

[10] For Bryden's later references to the Social Gospel, see *Why I Am A Presbyterian,* 116; and *The Spirit of Jesus in St. Paul*, 160.

[11] Bryden, "The Presbyterian Conception of the Word of God," unpublished portion of manuscript, The Presbyterian Church Archives.

[12] Bryden, *The Christian's Knowledge of God,* 244.

masses."[13] Yet, he also insisted that he made these statements "without being either socialist or communist in any orthodox sense."[14]

All this began when, as a young Presbyterian minister in Western Canada, Walter Bryden found his theological education severely tried and tested by the ideals of socialism and capitalism. Only later would he be able to reflect clearly on the challenge and conclude that all earthly systems stood under the judgment of God, that humanity's existence was marked by a state of constant crisis, and that the Christian faith, rightly understood, demanded a state of constant revolution as the reign of God breaks into the world. Like Barth, Bryden continued to support democratic socialism but was neither a party theorist nor activist. Originally a Liberal, Bryden supported the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation after the 1930s and was known, according to his son Kenneth Bryden, to have voted Communist on one or more occasions. In short, Walter Bryden never developed a Christian social philosophy which he sought to implement, not because he thought that social ethics were unimportant, but precisely because he believed that the church's role in the social and political sphere was of such importance that a theoretical ethic would always miss the mark. What was required of the church in a world of crisis was an "occasional" and "ad hoc" protest against the domestication of the gospel and the exploitation of the marginalized. The Christian movement, at its best, created freedom for the declaration of the prophetic Word of God. Formal alignments between Christianity and capitalism, or Christianity and Marxism, undermined the gospel and the social vision of the New Testament. To be sure, this was not altogether clear to Bryden in the years between 1909 and 1912. Nevertheless, at this stage Bryden was willing to move beyond the constraints of the old orthodoxies while reserving the right to distance himself from the new ideals.

During his tenure as the minister of St. Andrew's, Lethbridge, Walter Bryden married Violet Nasmith Bannatyne (1884–1969). Born in Scotland, Bannatyne had trained as a teacher and taught for a time in the slums of Glasgow before emigrating to Canada. Her father, a supporter of Gladstone's Liberals in Britain, had worked in the Glasgow shipyards. The Brydens had two sons: William Bannatyne Bryden, who was born on August 10, 1911 in Lethbridge and died at the age of fourteen on August 25, 1925 in Woodville, Ontario; and Walter Kenneth Bryden, who worked as a civil servant in the Saskatchewan government of Tommy Douglas, served as a New Democratic member of the Ontario Legislature (1959–67), and taught political economy at the University of Toronto. He died in Toronto in 2002.

[13] Ibid., 244–45.
[14] Ibid., 247.

After three years in Lethbridge, the Bryden family moved east to Ontario. There, from 1912 to 1921, Walter Bryden served as the minister of Knox Presbyterian Church, Woodville—"a quiet little village in the heart of old Ontario."[15] Knox Church had been founded in 1848 as a congregation of the Free Church and represented the kind of congregation within which Bryden had been raised in Knox's, Galt. During the years in Woodville, Bryden gave himself to the task of preaching and, according to his parishioners and students, he was "like a flame in the pulpit."[16]

Within a few years, however, Western Canada beckoned Bryden again, this time a call to St. James Presbyterian Church in Melfort, Saskatchewan, the congregation where the well-known Presbyterian leader W.A. Cameron had ministered. St. James had been established in 1903. A new church building opened on April 30, 1905. In 1921, when Bryden became its minister, the congregation had a membership of forty and an annual revenue of $1,526.[17] After having ministered in an established Ontario congregation for almost a decade, Bryden once again found himself in a small, recently established, struggling, frontier church. He was remembered by the people there for his love of baseball and his work with the young people of the town. Ministry in a small western congregation afforded him time to write, and there he completed most of the manuscript of *The Spirit of Jesus in St. Paul* for publication.

At the same time, the movement for church union among Presbyterians, Methodists, and Congregationalists, which had originated in 1902 and drawn almost unanimous support in Western Canada, had gained the approval and momentum required to bring it to culmination in 1925. In 1924, for reasons that are not clear, Walter Bryden resigned as the minister of St. James Church and moved the family back to Galt, Ontario. According to Kenneth Bryden, the decision was precipitated by illness in the family. But was there more to it? Had there been difficulty in the relationship between the pastor and people of St. James, the kind of tension in pastoral ministry to which Bryden alluded in *The Spirit of Jesus in St. Paul*? Did Bryden see that the proposed church union was about to sweep across Western Canada and dramatically redraw denominational lines? At the age of forty-one did Bryden experience a crisis of faith and/or vocation? Did he anticipate the possibility of a teaching position if he were closer to the center of the church? Whatever the reason, it was a rather strange and dramatic decision which, as it happened, prepared the way for his subsequent appointment to Knox College. For a year Bryden

[15] Bryden, "The Triumph of Reality," in *Separated Unto the Gospel*, 131.
[16] Wade, "The Theological Achievement of Walter Bryden," 3.
[17] B. Wittome and C. Bush, "St. James Presbyterian Church History," The Presbyterian Church Archives.

served as a supply preacher and immersed himself in the church union debate in preparation for the final vote at the General Assembly in 1925. As difficult as the decision was for him, he sided with the anti-unionists. Soon he was called by the continuing Presbyterians in Woodville, Ontario, once again to become their minister. He accepted the call while also agreeing to teach at Knox College on a part-time basis.

Bryden's pastoral experience was formative as he continued to find his theological voice. For one thing, the philosophical idealism he had imbibed as a university student was now creating waves among the rank and file membership of the churches in Canada. Idealism offered a powerful vision of an evolving Christianity in the progressive development of western civilization. Darwinism, Marxism, Freudianism, industrialization, urbanization, and consumerism had created a restless intellectual spirit across the country and a not inconsiderable challenge to Christian orthodoxy. Idealism initially provided a way of understanding and managing these changes and challenges. Christianity, it was argued, was evolving through the secular process of history. This religious progress was essentially spiritual in nature, and was nevertheless manifested everywhere in concrete terms. In this unfolding of human consciousness in history, religious faith could be better comprehended through rational and intellectual understanding. Piety and critical thought, therefore, were not at odds since faith could not be faith if it defied intellectual inquiry. Idealism provided for a universal union of opposites as the old divisions between the spiritual and the material, the sacred and the secular, God and humanity, were obliterated.[18] Idealism, therefore, inspired a compelling religious and social vision. But it was a philosophical achievement that also exacerbated religious uncertainty and created chaos and confusion among Presbyterians. Presbyterian ministers, Walter Bryden among them, were often forced to deal with the consequences in local congregations.

A. B. McKillop has described a very good example of this uncertainty as it existed in an exchange of correspondence between Mr. J. M. Grant, an otherwise anonymous Presbyterian Sunday school superintendent from Toronto, and John Watson of Queen's University. The correspondence took place between 1911 and 1918 during the period that Walter Bryden was the minister in Woodville, Ontario. Having read some of Watson's books, Grant was troubled by the religious difficulties created by idealism for orthodox faith. Was the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity now tenable? Did the resurrection of Jesus violate natural laws? Did it make sense to speak of God as absolute perfection? If God is perfect love, how is sin to be accounted for? Is the forgiveness of sin to be found in the atoning death of Jesus? What can be believed concerning immortality and eternal life? Grant's questions were not

[18] McKillop, *A Disciplined Intelligence*, 212.

motivated simply by intellectual curiosity. They represented the increasing anguish of a troubled soul struggling to come to terms with the meaning of Christian faith in the emerging modern world. The anguish was only exacerbated by the fact that he had been given the responsibility of passing on the Christian faith to the next generation in his church's Sunday school.

In his replies Watson tried to assure Grant that there was not only a way to reconcile Christian faith with the difficult questions he raised, but that idealism provided precisely the solution required and therefore the highest expression of Christian teaching. The Trinity, Watson explained, must be viewed in terms of the Self-Manifestation of God who, as an immanent deity, identifies with and is manifest in humanity. Christ is the perfect type of this manifestation and the Holy Spirit is the identification of that which binds humanity and deity together. The resurrection ought not to be interpreted literally and questions about the divinity of Christ, the forgiveness of sins, and eternal life should not detract from the essential message of Christianity. "Do you think," Watson wrote, "it really matters from the point of view of the essence of religion, whether one accepts what is called the divinity of Christ? What, to begin with, are we to understand by it? Does it mean that a man existed from all eternity, who yet was not a man but God? That, of course, is a thoroughly unthinkable thing."[19] Indeed, Watson wrote later to Grant, "No creed of any church can be accepted."

There is no evidence that Walter Bryden knew of this correspondence, and it is entirely possible that few, if any, members of his congregation in the small Ontario village of Woodville were plagued with the doubts that troubled Grant. But that is not the point. Walter Bryden knew John Watson's work; Bryden saw the impact of philosophical idealism on theology and church life in Canada; and as a Presbyterian minister who had been educated in idealism and who was required to preach weekly he struggled with the same questions. Bryden was astute enough to realize that Watson's approach, like that of Watson's mentor Edward Caird, was driven by a desire to rescue and reassert the moral and religious dimension of life which had been undermined by modern skepticism. Yet, as A. B. McKillop notes, the objective idealism adopted by Watson provided the basis for a form of belief that resembled evolutionary naturalism. In Watson's hands Christianity could absorb the evolutionary change and the fundamental unity of nature asserted by Hegel and Darwin. "The convergence between Hegelian idealism and the new naturalism . . . was one of the most important and distinctive results of Darwin's impact on British metaphysics."[20] It resulted, however, in a form of pantheism that was virtually indistinguishable from naturalistic and materi-

[19] John Watson, cited in McKillop, *A Disciplined Intelligence*, 214.

[20] McKillop, *A Disciplined Intelligence,* 215.

alistic atheism. This was precisely the critique that Bryden mounted against idealism during the 1930s. It was a criticism fueled by the failure of idealism to deliver a form of Christian faith appropriate to the Christian tradition as Bryden understood it in light of his pastoral experience. Idealism reduced the complexity and richness of the Christian tradition to the essence of Christian consciousness—the unity of humanity and God. But Bryden's concern was also driven by the conviction that the idealist form of Christianity was ultimately inadequate for modern sensibilities, especially when those sensibilities began to shift after World War I.

The Great War proved to be a difficult and disillusioning event for Presbyterian ministers like Walter Bryden, who tried to make sense of the suffering and slaughter in Europe from the perspective of parish life in Canada. At first, the ideals of progressive and liberal Calvinism persisted and the war was interpreted as a refining process in the evolutionary development of history. Advocates of the social gospel, which reached its apogee in Canadian Protestantism in 1915, appeared confident that the war experience would promote the redemption of Canadian society. As reports of the carnage and destruction unleashed by the war in Europe made their way back to Canada, however, Canadian Presbyterian clergy and teachers were forced to reassess many of the theological presuppositions with which they were conducting their ministries. Protestant ministers who served as soldiers and chaplains overseas often offered the most trenchant critiques of the theologies operative in the Canadian churches. Many of the issues enunciated during this period became critical themes in the theology which Walter Bryden would embrace wholeheartedly by the late 1920s.

The initial Presbyterian support for the war had been fueled by loyalty to the trinity of God, king and country, and the belief that "the war was part of a larger battle in which the forces of righteousness were combating evil and injustice."[21] But as the war unfolded it became apparent to many that culture Protestantism could be used to justify almost any and all national economic, social and military interests. The ineradicable evil and intractable suffering forced the churches to confront the reality of human sinfulness once again. Chaplains at the front discovered that a Christian message which emphasized individual moral righteousness and social moral reform fell on the deaf ears of soldiers whose existential concern was driven by fear in the face of death. The Presbyterian J. W. Falconer, for example, realized that many Christians in Canada were trying to come to grips with the meaning of the war for their faith. Writing for the Commission on the War and the Spiritual Life of the Church set up by the General Assembly, he noted the disillusionment with which many struggled:

[21] David B. Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 158.

> The war has uncovered the hideous features of evil. By its entail of calamity it has confirmed the Scripture, 'Sin when it is finished, bringeth forth death.' We had been flattering ourselves upon the progress of the world. . . . We were priding ourselves on our refinement, our ability, our humanism, thinking that culture was winning its way towards a human perfectability . . . . Even the Church had begun to forget that this is an evil world, where the children of the Heavenly Father cannot go on their way unmolested.[22]

The Calvinist emphasis on sin and the providence of God meant that Presbyterians should have had a theological framework within which to deal with the challenge of the war. However, the conceptions of sin and providence prevalent in both confessional and progressive Calvinism seemed somehow inadequate to address the horrific evil being perpetuated in Europe. Preachers like George C. Pidgeon of the Bloor Street Presbyterian congregation, and also a member of the General Assembly's commission, turned to the centrality of the cross and interpreted the sacrifice and suffering everywhere evident in the war in terms of the sacrificial and atoning death of Christ. His sermons overseas to soldiers in France focused on repentance, sacrifice, and salvation. Others emphatically declared that the idealism taught in the universities and theological colleges no longer applied.

David B. Marshall summarizes the apparent effect of the war on Canadian Protestant clergy in the following terms:

> War had made apparent the inadequacy and outright sentimentality of much of the liberalism which had dominated thinking in Presbyterian and Methodist circles. The real presence of evil in human nature and Christian civilization was made clear. It seemed no longer possible to trust in progress and look exclusively to human nature as a means to understanding and reaching God. Salvation would not be brought about by some evolutionary process; there had to be fundamental redemption of the human personality. Although the war did not produce a religious revival, it did lead to a renewal of interest in theology . . . . The quest for a deeper theological understanding of the Word of God and Jesus Christ in the postwar era had its roots in the bloodied soil of the battlefields.[23]

Among the Presbyterian ministers who would pursue the quest for a recovery of Reformed theology focused on the Word of God and Jesus Christ in the postwar era was Walter Bryden. Indeed, his emphasis on the cross of

[22] Cited in ibid., 162.

[23] Marshall, *Secularizing the* Faith, 179. See also 156–80 for a summary of the effects of the war on Canadian Protestantism.

God's crucified Messiah as the locus of God's Judging-Saving Word resonated with the Canadian Protestant experience of the Great War.

Ministry, Preaching, and the New Testament

In addition to wrestling with socialism and idealism during this period, and the influence of the Great War on his thinking, Walter Bryden was confronted daily with the business of pastoral ministry and the task of Christian preaching. In a 1927 pamphlet called *The Christian Ministry,* written to support the continuing Presbyterian Church's efforts to recruit new ministers, Bryden reflected upon the nature of ministry within the Reformed tradition in general and upon his own experience in particular.[24] In three parts Bryden set out his understanding of the Presbyterian doctrine of ordained leadership, issued an appeal to young people to consider the benefits and motives of a vocation within the Presbyterian Church in Canada, and described the unique challenges and opportunities of the Canadian setting.

Bryden began by emphasizing that ministry is a gift of the risen and ascended Christ to the church, and not a professional service to advance civic and cultural ideals. In common with other Christian traditions Presbyterianism held that persons vested with church government derived their authority not from the people but from Jesus Christ. Presbyterianism, however, Bryden argued, made more room for the recognition of the people and the inner reality of Christian experience in the individual soul's sense of a divine call. The vocation of ordained ministry "came from God through a congregation and entailed responsibility to both." Bryden was realistic about the many mixed motivations for entering the service of the church, including the promise of adventure, the desire to serve, the opportunity of a reflective life, and the privileges of leadership. But he argued that mere human motives could never sustain the ordinary minister because there was too much perplexity, doubt, sorrow, seemingly useless labor and downright failure in every minister's life. Christian ministry, Bryden wrote autobiographically, was a burden because the work required the minister to deal with "the anxieties, insecurities, fears and sins of every individual under [the clergy's] care." The clergy encountered "troubles, perplexity, and opposition" known to few others. But God used mixed motives and heavy burdens to lead those truly called into their deeper selves as the tests and trials of ministry unfolded. It is a remarkable thing, Bryden noted, that "those who have once been tested and tried in the Ministry of Christ seldom find any other kind of work congenial." The hope

[24] Bryden, *The Christian Ministry* (Toronto: The Upper Canada Tract Society, 1927); also published in *Separated Unto the Gospel*, 120–30.

of the Christian minister is that an honest worker has never really failed, nor can such a worker possibly fail.[25]

Having labored for almost seventeen years in Lethbridge, Woodville, and Melfort, Bryden must have often wondered about the fruit of his own ministry, especially during a period when ministers spent their time engaged in work that appeared to have very little in common with what the church's ministers had done for almost two thousand years. On the one hand, Bryden knew that clerical identity could no longer be rooted in the minister's role as a teacher and defender of the church's doctrine, as Ephraim Scott, the erstwhile editor of the *Presbyterian Record*, and his confessional Calvinist colleagues seemed to emphasize. On the other hand, Bryden resisted the redefinition of Christian ministry by the exigencies of the times. Christian ministry entailed more than planning programs, administering institutions, and advancing ideals. It had to be rooted, he would come to understand, in the call of God centered in the Judging Saving Word.[26]

The focus of Bryden's struggle to come to terms with the nature of Christian ministry lay in what he considered to be its primary task, namely preaching. In 1929 he addressed the Spring convocation of the Presbyterian College, Montreal, on precisely this theme. Noting the modest and unusual nature of his own ministry, Bryden suggested that there were advantages to never having been the minister of an influential city pulpit: "I am persuaded, however, that this kind of ministerial career has its advantages and compensations. You get to know real life as other men do not know it, and your own life is tested by the inwardness of things rather than by the outwardness of conventions which after all do not matter. Besides, you are not so likely to be encompassed by exacting duties and if you have the will, you may train your mind and heart on those far greater things. As I see it now, my true student days began after I left the college halls; and had I to do it all over again, I surely would choose the same kind of ministry."[27] On the basis of his experience, he chose to speak about "those few things which have increasingly appealed to me in the course of my own ministry, as the essentials toward which one ought to strive" in order to make one's preaching effective, and to confine himself therefore to what he considered a simpler necessity, namely, "the need of first finding ourselves and then being steadfastly true to our highest selves at any sacrifice in all this work of preaching."[28]

Preaching, as Bryden defined it, was "the unveiling of one's soul as that soul in the course of life is being touched by God." Preaching was not to be

[25] Bryden, "The Christian Ministry," in *Separated Unto the Gospel,* 120–26.
[26] Ibid. See also Fraser, *Church, College, and Clergy*, 153–57.
[27] Bryden, "The Triumph of Reality," in *Separated Unto the Gospel*, 131.
[28] Ibid., 131, 133.

characterized by arguments and accents, but by thinking which had passed through the fire of the preacher's own experience as preachers searched their own faith to see what they truly believed. The preacher had to wrestle with true beliefs as "the issue of one's whole being as wrought upon by circumstance and God." The real test of ministry, Bryden advised future clergy, was what they would inwardly be "in the face of deepest disappointment and baffling frustration, in the face of those people you are sure to meet who never seem to get the real and greater meaning of the thing you believe and try to teach." Bryden sensed that there was a certain mystery to preaching which ought to instill awe and reverence in the preacher: "To see in the life around us, in the men and women we have known and in whose presence we have stood, humbled, and to see in this Christian religion, and in that unsearchable and indefinable person, Christ Jesus himself, *something* which eludes our grasp altogether and yet which haunts us as the ultimate reality, which we cannot ever give up, to see this is to possess the soul of a preacher who will be able to help his fellow men." Convinced that the church could no longer rely on its authority to impose its message on modern people, Bryden pointed to the self-authenticating and self-evidencing power of the gospel message. Preaching did not require rational arguments or rhetorical methods to commend the Christian message. The triumph of reality occurred when preachers sounded "the authentic note of that something '*Other*' in the soul and people heard in the preacher one who had surrendered truly and fully to God." Appealing to Barth, Bryden argued that a preacher must "recognize God." "It is easy," Bryden quoted Barth, "to say 'recognize,' but recognizing is an ability won only in fierce, inner, personal conflict. It is a task beside which, all cultural, moral and patriotic duties, all efforts in applied religion are child's play. For here, one must give oneself up in order to give himself over to God, that God's will may be done." To do God's will, however, means to begin with God anew. God's will "will not be a corrected continuation of our own. It approaches ours as *wholly other*."[29]

In short, during the course of his ministry Bryden had come to realize that neither dogmatic nor liberal thinking could sustain the task of preaching. Bryden knew that modernity's critique of Christian proclamation could not be evaded. It was no longer possible, as confessional Calvinists continued to insist, that preaching could proceed along the lines of dogmatic and traditional thinking. Preachers who refused to acknowledge the ethos of the modern world, who refused to be honest with themselves or with those they led, may have had a gospel to preach, but it was not *their* gospel. It had not passed through the fires of their own experience, and it had never been refined by the agonies of their own doubts. At the same time, the modern ethos pro-

[29] Ibid., 131–45; Fraser, *Church, College, and Clergy,* 153–57.

vided a new preaching ideal which Bryden equally resisted. During the late nineteenth century preaching had taken a decidedly psychological turn and theology had been transformed into anthropology. Preachers, Bryden had been taught by progressive Calvinists, were now supposed to provide rational insights into human experience in the service of a renewed social vision. Preaching was the art of communication rather than the call to proclamation. Such free and liberal thinking, Bryden argued, gave preachers something to preach, but it bore little resemblance to the church's gospel. In both cases, preachers were driven by the outwardness of conventions rather than the inwardness of convictions.

During his years in the pastorate Bryden continued to struggle with the pressures of weekly preaching in the midst of these competing claims. But after reading Karl Barth in the 1920s, and being reminded of his teacher James Denney, Bryden came to realize that there was a connection between theology and preaching that provided a more profound understanding of the preacher's experience of God. Furthermore, it forced him to rethink the character of theology itself. Barth had made an important claim: "that the possibility of a Christian theology is specifically conditioned by the fact that there is Christian speech." Bryden realized that the connection between theology and preaching is not simply important, it is essential, and he agreed that "there can be no Christian theology except through the task, the necessity in fact, and indeed through the recognition of the utter impossibility of Christian preaching." Theology not only grows out of preaching, it is also sustained by preaching at all times. "Theology is the issuance of that which precedes it, namely Christian speech." Barth's searching analysis of the meaning of Christian speech was, Bryden argued, "evidently the result of the perplexing problem imposed upon Barth as he labored to impart the Word of God to the humble people of a secluded Swiss parish in Safenwil. There is nothing about Barth which is of greater importance than the fact that his theology is so vitally and essentially related to his task as a preacher, that is to say, to the task of the Church. It is not enough, however, simply to recognize this fact. In order to understand Barth, to feel the power of his arguments, I am persuaded that we must also, in some real sense, have shared his peculiar difficulty."[30] Bryden understood Barth and felt the power of his arguments precisely because he had shared Barth's peculiar difficulty as a preacher in the second decade of the twentieth century.

As he continued to struggle with idealism, confront the challenge posed to Christian faith by the Great War, and wrestle with the ongoing challenge of Christian preaching during this period, Walter Bryden immersed himself in Paul's Corinthian correspondence and discovered 'the strange new

[30] Bryden, "After Modernism, What?" Unpublished manuscript, 179–81.

world within the Bible.' *The Spirit of Jesus in St. Paul,* written during the course of weekly preaching in Woodville and Melfort, shows that Bryden continued to think deeply about the meaning of ministry in the light of contemporary theological scholarship. In a generous introductory note the New Testament scholar William Manson recommended Bryden as "a young Canadian theologian whose attainments, while recognized in his own community, have not hitherto asserted themselves in any appeal to a more general audience."[31] Manson was Professor of New Testament at Knox College from 1919 to 1925, when he was appointed Professor of New Testament Language, Literature and Theology at New College, Edinburgh. Noting the connection between Paul's theology and the primitive Christian experience out of which it sprang, Manson pointed out how Bryden brought out the essential oneness of the ethical and emotional content of the theological system that resulted from the working out of ideas and motives already present and operative in the Christian soul. Bryden's insistence on the identification of the Holy Spirit with Jesus seemed to guarantee, Manson concluded, the unity of Paul's theology with the general historic witness of his time.[32] Manson commended Bryden's book because he brought this out in an analysis of Pauline teaching that was helpful both to religious experience and to practical life.

In the foreword Bryden's former teacher John McFadyen also commended the "literary first-fruits of my old Canadian pupil" as going to the root of the matter through a psychological study that brought readers nearer the center. McFadyen, by now teaching in Glasgow, noted that Bryden's discussion was not conducted in a speculative manner by a dispassionate observer, but by a Christian minister who was willing to be searched and tried himself by "the standards exhibited in that first and greatest of Christian ministers, and, amid all the chequered experience incidental to a faithful ministry, it is a summons to the perennial Source of refreshment and renewal."[33] In a review for the *Canadian Journal of Religious Thought* John Dow noted that although Bryden had "modestly sought two sponsors for his volume in Professor Manson and Professor J. E. McFadyen," readers "will welcome this book from what they know of the author himself."[34] Dow suggested that Bryden's work as a minister made him an ideal interpreter of Paul because he was "not the scholar who knows all the lore of the dictionaries, but the missionary on the field who has had fresh contact with the heathen heart, and the preacher who knows the vexations of congregational jealousies and

[31] William Manson, "Introductory Note," in Bryden, *The Spirit of Jesus in St. Paul*, 6.
[32] Ibid., 5.
[33] John E. McFadyen, "Foreword," in Bryden, *The Spirit of Jesus in St. Paul*, 7–8.
[34] John Dow, Review of Bryden, *The Spirit of Jesus in St. Paul* in *Canadian Journal of Religious Thought* 4 (Jan.–Feb. 1927) 89–90.

strange teachers." Bryden understood, Dow argued, that Paul was "not a master logician drilling all Christendom into a mechanically conceived creed, but a man on fire with Christ, pleading, exhorting, teaching a faith that saves."[35] Another reviewer noted that "the conception is original and the execution well done" but criticized what he considered to be "Bryden's loose views on Divine inspiration." The book, apparently, stirred some interest in England as well as in Canada.[36]

What was Bryden trying to do in this book? As the reviewers observed, *The Spirit of Jesus in St. Paul* was a psychological study of Paul's religious experience as that experience was revealed in the New Testament letters to the Corinthians. Assuming an analogy between the experience of the early church, specifically the experience of the Apostle Paul, and the experience of the modern church, particularly his own experience as a Christian minister, Bryden appealed to the Holy Spirit as the basis for such an identification. The Spirit of Jesus which inhabited and enlivened the soul of Paul was the same Spirit at work in the life of the church today. This appeal to the Spirit, Bryden believed, overcame not only the tendency in modern scholarship to draw a sharp divide between the religion of Jesus and the religion of Paul, or the experience of the primitive church and Paul's theology, but it also overcame the distance and discontinuity between Paul's time and our own. By studying "the 'soul of Paul' as his inner thoughts and feelings, his ethical appreciations and spiritual aspirations reveal themselves in these two letters," Bryden hoped that Paul's life would have some practical significance in understanding "the perplexities of our modern Church life, and in lending some guidance in the discharge of our important and difficult work."[37]

When Bryden examined Paul's rather strange religious experience in the Corinthian letters he had trouble reconciling it with the domesticated ideals of modern Christianity. Influenced by an eschatological reading of the New Testament, Bryden concluded that the thoughts and actions of the apostle were inexplicable apart from Paul's identification with Jesus and his belief that there was a continuity and spiritual unity between them. The basis of this belief for Paul, Bryden argued, rested upon Paul's conviction that his experience was the expression of the Spirit of Jesus operative in his life as a power and presence that created spiritual and ethical realities. The kingdom inaugurated by the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus continued to break into the world through the witness and work of Jesus' Spirit in the souls of his followers. Over against the prevailing tendency in modern scholarship to drive a wedge between Paul and Jesus, Bryden boldly asserted that a radical

[35] Ibid., 89–90.

[36] *The Globe* (January 9, 1926); *The Mail* (July 10, 1926). University of Toronto Archives.

[37] Bryden, *The Spirit of Jesus in St. Paul*, 36.

discontinuity between the experience of Paul and the teachings of Jesus could not be sustained on the basis of a careful reading of the Corinthian letters. Wilhelm Wrede's 1906 book *Paulus*, for example, had sketched an apostle who attributed the features of a Gnostic master to Jesus thereby transforming Christianity into a Hellenistic cult. In a 1919 essay called "The Meaning of Paul for the Modern Christian" Johannes Weis had argued that Paul's doctrines of justification by faith, conversion by grace, and sanctification by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit were simply meaningless to modern people.[38]

Bryden would have none of it. Influenced by his former teacher H. A. A. Kennedy's careful reading of Paul, Bryden described an apostle whose heart and mind were inclined to a knowledge of God through the Holy Spirit. Paul's faith, therefore, consisted of more than knowledge about the historical Jesus, and Paul's experience could not be reduced to an ethical imitation of Jesus' life. Indeed, there was not only a continuity between Jesus and Paul, but an essential oneness between them. Paul believed that his experience of the Spirit of Jesus was an experience of knowing and being known by God. This was, for Bryden, an existential reality which transcended historical and ethical description, and it was the only adequate explanation, he concluded, for Paul's apostolic ministry. In short, through his study of Paul's theology in the Corinthian letters Walter Bryden found "a Christ-mysticism, a case of Christ's being formed in man by the energy of the Holy Spirit, and he reckons that this is authentic mysticism and the proper mystery."[39] The same Christ-mysticism, Bryden concluded, not only sustained the church throughout its history, but also provided the only authentic basis for Christian faith and life in the modern world.[40]

Bryden's exposition of Pauline theology in the late second and early third decades of the twentieth century was marked by a determined effort to cut away the tangle of philosophical, historical and theological weeds that he believed were choking out the life of the church in the modern world. Liberal Protestant theology had reduced Paul's theology to spiritual and ethical ideals to be understood and imitated. Conservative Protestant theology had refused to acknowledge the legitimate insights of historical criticism. Neither would do, and Bryden longed for a credible alternative to the rationalism, idealism, naturalism, and traditionalism of his day. Written before Bryden's encounter with Barth and Brunner, *The Spirit of Jesus in St. Paul* raised many of the same

[38] James D. Smart, *The Past, Present and Future of Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979) 100–101.

[39] Joseph C. McLelland, "Walter Bryden: 'By Circumstance and God,'" in *Called to Witness*, edited by W. Stanford Reid (The Presbyterian Church in Canada: Committee on History, 1980) 2:125.

[40] Bryden, *The Spirit of Jesus in St. Paul*, 13–21.

questions that drove their reaction against the hegemony of liberal Protestant theology in Europe in the second decade of the twentieth century. One realizes why, as James Smart suggested, Walter Bryden was soon to feel a community of interest with them. They had been struggling as he had been to find a way forward to a church that would recover its roots in the Reformation.[41]

Bryden later reflected on the significance of this book for the development of his theological thought in an unpublished manuscript on modern theology. Following World War One, Bryden found his theological and practical difficulties as an active minister in a congregation coming to a focus. Before that time, he had passed through all the various phases of modern critical and theological thought. After studying Albert Schweitzer and H.A. Charles, Bryden came to the conclusion "that the whole outlook of the New Testament was eschatological in character" and "that the expectation of Jesus was distinctly so." Increasingly, Bryden was dissatisfied with the basis of authority for Christian faith in the "historic Jesus" of the historical-critical schools and while he appreciated the insights of such scholars as John Oman and Albrecht Ritschl, he could not reconcile how their views could be used to maintain adequately the particular claims of the traditional Christian faith.[42]

The work of John Wood Oman (1860–1939) particularly intrigued Bryden. Oman was a Presbyterian theologian who taught at Westminster College, Cambridge (from 1907), and served as principal from 1925 to 1935. Interested in the theology of Schleiermacher and Ritschl, Oman understood religion as the feeling of the supernatural or the sense of the infinite beyond the finite world. Oman wrote thirteen books including his most well-known books *The Church and the Divine* Order (1911) and *The Natural and the Supernatural* (1931). Bryden's encounter with Oman's theology was decisive in helping Bryden understand the nature of religious experience in modern theology. When, in 1931, James Smart inquired of Bryden where he should make a beginning at serious theological reading, Bryden sent Smart to read everything Oman had written.[43] By then, Bryden had been reading Oman for almost two decades. Principal Oman, Bryden believed, was "one of the most penetrating and incisive thinkers among modern scholars," and represented "the most challenging and convincing exponent of the modern religious viewpoint." Although Oman had been a product of philosophical and religious idealism, Bryden appreciated the fact that Oman never seemed to be in bondage to any school of thought.

41 James D. Smart, "The Evangelist as Theologian," in *Separated Unto the Gospel*, x.
42 W. W. Bryden, "After Modernism, What?" 181.
43 James D. Smart, "Lest We Forget," *The Presbyterian Record* 94.9 (1975) 6.