

Dr. H. Wheeler Robinson's "Christian Experience of the Holy Spirit."

WE feel it proper to draw the special attention of our readers to this book,—not because its author happens to be the President of the Baptist Historical Society and a frequent and valued contributor to its periodical organ, nor yet merely because it is a book by a Baptist writer on a most important doctrine of the Christian religion: we have more solid reasons than these. The book appears in a new series entitled the "Library of Constructive Theology" (published by Messrs. Nisbet & Co., price 10s. 6d. per vol.). The object of the series, as stated in the general introduction, is "a candid, courageous, and well-informed effort to think out anew, in the light of modern knowledge, the foundation affirmations of our common Christianity" (p. v.). As it is the distinctive note of modern knowledge to found upon the data of experience, the writers desire "to develop their theology on the basis of the religious consciousness" (p. vi.). It is surely a fact on which our Denomination may be congratulated that the General Editor of the series is a Baptist, Sir James Marchant, and that Dr. Wheeler Robinson is himself one of the Theological Editors, having as his colleague the eminent Anglican divine, Dr. W. R. Matthews, of King's College, London. Two other volumes had previously appeared, and achieved prompt and conspicuous success—Dr. H. R. Mackintosh's *Christian Experience of Forgiveness*, and Canon O. C. Quick's *Christian Sacraments*. We wish to say that in our judgment the latest addition to the series is fully worthy of its place side by side with these predecessors. We hope that many of our readers will put themselves in a position to form an opinion of their own on the book by reading it for themselves. The object of this notice is not to attempt a critical estimate of it, but to show them cause for thinking that they would be well rewarded for such a perusal.

And in the first place we think it worth while to emphasise that the book is eminently *readable*. It is well written in a style that is clear, vigorous and interesting throughout. The vocabulary used is literary rather than technical. Too often, in learned works on theology or philosophy, there is such a frequent recurrence of certain terms used in a peculiar sense as almost to constitute a technical jargon of the writer's own. This work is favourably distinguished by an almost complete absence of such a vocabulary

—a characteristic which may be due in part to the author’s wide acquaintance with the best literature of former and recent times, including not only theology, philosophy, and science, but also biography, poetry, and fiction. This acquaintance contributes to the readableness of the book also by furnishing frequent and usually most apt illustrative quotations on almost every page.

But most important of all, this is a thoroughly *live* book. It makes constantly the impression of contact with reality. The subject is one that inevitably raises many questions which precisely at the present time are matters of controversy, and occasion great difficulty to thoughtful people. These are not evaded, but honestly met, and a courageous attempt is made to deal with them. That he is equally successful in all cases we do not pretend, but we can promise his readers that they will find real light thrown on a considerable number of present-day perplexities. And it will not diminish their confidence in his guidance to find him frankly disavowing ability to give any satisfactory answer to certain questions which by their intrinsic nature transcend the bound of human experience or reason. He speaks as he finds. The reality of the handling rests above all on the fact that it is no detached treatment of the theme from a merely theoretic or intellectual point of view, but the search of a man with all the powers of his nature for truth, on matters felt to be of the most vital import to himself as well as to others. And herein he is only faithful to the programme set before him. For if theology is to be drawn out on the lines of Christian experience then of whoever else’s experience account is taken, that of the writer himself must needs play a foremost part, as the source of a first-hand knowledge of his subject.

The foundation on Christian experience will serve to explain the omissions as well as the inclusions of the book. Very likely some readers may be inclined at first sight to feel disappointment at not finding a discussion of certain matters in which they are personally interested. But in most cases they will perceive that the omissions are explained and justified by the limitations involved in the programme. Thus, e.g., there is no section dealing at length with the history of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit; earlier attempts at formulating it are referred to only as this serves the purpose of the author’s own exposition. But he has notable insight into the development of religious ideas, and not the least valuable feature of his book are the penetrating remarks on the significance of important events or phases of thought in the past history of the church (see, e.g., the outline of modern English Church History on p. 48, or the indication of the inadequacy of “Adoptianism” on p. 132, or of the loss of immediacy in the sense of the divine presence introduced by Catholic sacramentalism, p. 239).

We cannot, on the other hand, but be struck by the breadth of his treatment of the subject, and the large ranges of Christian theology which come within its compass. The explanation of this feature lies, of course, in the fact stressed at the outset that this doctrine really "comprehends or involves all the others, for it is in experience that all the great doctrines are focussed to their burning point, and the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is the doctrine of this experience" (p. 1). Yet, as he points out elsewhere, in the earlier days of the church, there was comparative neglect of it, and what formulation was accorded it was, so to speak, at secondhand. "Broadly speaking, we may say that the Catholic doctrine of the Holy Spirit was reached by a simple transference of the victorious doctrine of the Son to the Third Person, without any adequate discussion of the new problems, least of all discussion of them on the basis of Christian experience, the only true basis of a doctrine of the Spirit. May we not say that . . . we are only now beginning to see the new approach to the doctrine of the Holy Trinity through a doctrine of the Spirit based on experience. The fourth century, by the very manner of its approach to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, divorced the work from the Person. It is our opportunity to return to the standpoint of the New Testament, and to put the work of the Spirit into the foreground of discussion" (p. 65).

Accordingly, our author's object is just to invert the ancient procedure, and instead of approaching the doctrine of the Spirit through that of Father and Son, rather to approach the doctrine of God through that of the Spirit. It is carried out with conspicuous ability and fruitfulness. Despite the breadth of treatment just mentioned, he never for a moment loses sight of his central theme, or fails to make apparent the connection therewith of the topics dealt with by the way. An outstanding feature of his book, which at once shows his grasp of the subject, and greatly assists the reader in following his argument, is the clearness and logical sequence with which the material is arranged. At this point we cannot do better than quote his own summary. "It begins with a survey of Christian experience in general, in order to show the context of our experience of the Holy Spirit, and further discusses the reality of that experience (meeting the criticism that it is illusory), and the nature of the Spirit, so far as our own spirits throw light on this. The first part concludes by a cursory review of the chief manifestations of spirit in the widest sense of the term—in nature, history and personality. The second part begins with the Incarnation in relation to the Spirit of God, and shows how the Holy Spirit (working through the personality of Jesus Christ) creates the Church and its sacraments, uses the Scriptures and sanctifies the individual life. The third part . . . deals with