

ARTICLE II.

CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE AS A SOURCE OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY.¹

BY THE REV. FRANK HUGH FOSTER, PH.D., OBERLIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY.

THE Christian may be conceived as standing at the centre of three concentric circles. The first and largest of these is the world, the sum total of all the revelations of himself which God has made, and of the impressions of a religious nature which man receives. The second circle is that embracing the special community in which he stands by virtue of his Christian faith, the congregation of believers, or the church, a community with a distinct history and with characteristic experiences of its own, fitted by these to have, and thus naturally possessing, a body of doctrines called a Theology. The last circle is that in which he is brought into the immediate presence of God by special divine revelation given in the Bible. In the broadest sense the relation of these three circles is that indicated by their concentricity: the world includes the church, and the church embraces the Bible; but for convenience' sake we may distinguish and say that the Christian receives impressions from three different

the name Reason may be substituted, in the sense that there is a source of theological knowledge in the operations of the human reason upon all the facts presented to us in the universe apart from the special contributions of the church or the Bible. Each of these sources has its own peculiarities and limitations. Unaided reason has accomplished but little in the construction of positive Christian doctrine, though it is of the utmost importance in their development and defence. Christian experience gained within the communion of the church has its limitations in the subjectiveness, ambiguity, and distortion with which its utterances are often accompanied. The Bible needs interpretation into the language and thought of our own day; but then it is the purest source of doctrine, and more than that, it is the norm, the rule, to which the results gained by a study of the other sources must be brought for correction or for confirmation. The three sources taken together, yielding a beautiful harmony as they do, form in combination the proof of the Christian system, a proof which grows stronger with the process of time.

It is with this general view of its relations that the present article would treat Christian experience as a source of doctrine.

At the outset of the theme, as a reply to certain objections which may arise in the mind of the reader, it should be remarked that Christian experience actually is, as a matter of fact, a source of Christian doctrine. We need not quote again Martin Luther and the doctrine of justification, though his is one of the most instructive of examples. As a more general fact, it may be said of Lutheran theology, not merely in those portions which are distinctively Lutheran, and so sectarian, but in the great underlying principles which are common to both the reformed theologies, and thus form our

common Protestantism,¹ that it is determined throughout by appeal to the experience of the converted man, and that it historically sprung out of that experience. Protestants, unless they are prepared to deny their birthright, have therefore no justification in rejecting experience as a source of doctrine. Augustine's theology was founded upon his experience of grace. But these are ancient examples. Modern times show the same fact. The doctrine which now forms the underlying basis of most American preaching, that men have the ability to repent and are responsible for the immediate exercise of it, is a doctrine born not of the theories of the schools, which have been against it, but of the living experience of converted men. Ability and responsibility were appealed to by Bellamy, Emmons, Taylor, Nettleton, Beecher, Finney, and their successors of all schools of theology as facts of consciousness, and were acknowledged and found a place in theological systems upon the testimony of the same experience. Whatever, then, should be said by way of limitation or of criticism of the use made of experience by any school of thinkers, we are dealing not with a theological novelty, when we study Christian experience as a source of doctrine, but with a living fact of the Christian past and of the aggressive and creative Christian present.

We may advance further, and say that it is eminently reasonable that the experience of the church should be a source of its doctrine. It is reasonable that doctrine, which is tried by the standard of life, should itself spring forth out of life. When the infant church began its course in the

its eye upon his humanity, and hence came the doctrine of the perfect union of two natures in one person. Thus doctrine sprung out of experience, and could not fail to arise from it. But the doctrine also descended into Christian experience to become a factor in its development and itself to receive the test of application to life; and the fact that the successive great doctrines of the church purified and promoted the Christian life is the great, as it is the reasonable, proof of their truth. For truth is designed to promote religion, and religion is the divine life in the soul.

By way of progressive approach to the definition of Christian experience, let it be noted, first, that Christian experience has two aspects, individual and catholic.

Individual Christian experience is the sum of those facts of consciousness which any individual Christian has as a Christian. For example, the new birth, as a change of purpose fundamental, renewing, producing a new relation with God, and according with certain ideas of God which the mind forms, is a fact of the consciousness of the individual. Forgiveness of sin, or, to separate sharply the immediate from the inferential element, peace following upon confession and surrender, as a sense of harmony in the play of the moral faculties, is also a fact of consciousness. So is the progressive intensity of the fixed Christian choice, or growth in grace; and so are the beneficial effects of accepting and acting upon certain forms of religious opinion. All this possesses the prime advantage of all truth known by immediate consciousness, that of absolute certainty. The ultimate facts give rise also to certain inferences which do not

Christian experience in conversion to view God as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Thus the whole sphere of the changes effected immediately in the soul of man by the operative forces of Christianity is known by the ripened and developed Christian with the greatest certainty possible to a human being, and this certain knowledge forms, therefore, the best possible source of information as to the nature and laws of those forces, or as to Christian doctrine at this point. And though in the points attained by inference the certainty is of an inferior degree, still it is of as great value as that derived from any other induction from facts, for the considerations upon which it rests are facts of immediate knowledge.

Ere we pass to study the defects and limitations of the individual experience, note should be made of its office as the interpreter of all other Christians' experience. As only the trained musician can fully appreciate the purpose of the composer of some great oratorio, since he requires his own musical training as the organ by which he perceives the meaning of the production of another, so only the Christian can fully understand or correctly interpret the utterances of other Christians so as to employ their experience as confirmative or corrective of his own. A soul must have some ear for the rhythm and some susceptibility for the thought of poetry ere he can appreciate a human poet. Much more must there be an ear attuned by experience to heavenly melodies, if one is to understand the echoing strains of heaven-taught men.

Great as are the advantages of the individual Christian experience, it is precisely within this realm of the individual subjective experience that fanaticism and every irregularity have their home. It is not strange that minds wholly untrained in the observation of other and more tangible facts should fail in the observation and the inductions to be made from the facts of consciousness. Their failure is no pecu-

liarity of religion, but is exhibited in practical affairs, and is matched by the eccentricity of the learned which mars many a system of philosophy as well. Christian experience is like the perception of physical color. We know that a blue object is blue upon the testimony of our senses, and require no proof of it; and in the vast majority of cases men are so constituted that their perceptions are correct. But there is such a thing as color-blindness. Some see things blue which are of another color. They need to have their vision corrected by comparison with the vision of the generality of men. In the same way, the individual Christian experience, liable as it is not only to the disturbing influences of abnormal individuality but also to those of positive sin, requires to be brought to the test of its agreement with the general experience of the church, or with catholic experience, before it can receive that full measure of acceptance which is necessary to its free employment as a source of doctrine. If this is less necessary in matters of immediate consciousness, such as a new birth, it is more so in that vast range of subjects in which deductions, plausibilities, guesses, and gleams of truth form the most which we can seize upon as our material.

Now, evidently, as there is an individual, so there is, if we can get at it, a catholic Christian experience. Christianity has been in the world for now nigh nineteen hundred years. It is a God-given system of truth, and it has produced upon the multitude of its true followers the God-designed results, which are Christian experience. Christians have been of all ages, of both sexes, of every condition of life, high and low, rich and poor, educated and ignorant, bond and free, have inhabited every clime, have passed through every stage of civilization, and now, in their present broad distribution over the whole earth under every condition, reflect as in a mirror all that they have ever been. Under these circumstances, if there is such a thing as a common Christian experience, and if we can get at it, it will certainly be freed from every

liability to the charge of subjectivity. Individual, even racial, peculiarities will be swallowed up in the sum total, and the result will be as normal as anything upon earth can well be.

The problem, then, is not, What use shall we make of Christian experience when we get it? but, How can we get this catholic and normal experience in such a form as to enable us to use it? To the answer of this inquiry we now proceed.

Catholic experience is, first, deposited in the Scriptures. We need not now view the Bible as an inspired book, for, apart from this characteristic, it is largely a record of the experience and opinions of a body of men who were particularly well fitted to have a normal and hence catholic Christian experience. Take, for example, the New Testament alone. It was written by a group of men most of whom were immediately associated with the Saviour himself. They were under the best conceivable conditions for gaining an accurate knowledge of his purposes and teachings, and of forming their lives upon the model he set forth. So much, if we consider them merely as men in surroundings comparable in nature to those of other men. But there was promised to them by their master the "Comforter," under whose teaching their lives and conceptions took on a new form, and were fitted to become normal for all time. The most superficial comparison of their statements of truth with those of their immediate successors in the church will show that they did, in fact, occupy a plane of far higher elevation than mere unguided men could attain. And when the variety of relations and conditions into which these wide travelling evangelists were brought, is considered, it is evident that nothing is lacking to make their Christian experience one of peculiar variety and richness, at least; and who can successfully dispute the verdict of the church when it says, of absolute normality? It were enough for our pres-

ent purpose, however, to establish the position of the Scriptures as one of high authority in matters of Christian experience. They must at least occupy the same general place with other original documents of societies, in which the original form of the corporate life is generally found most truly represented, as in the original rule of Benedict, etc.

But there have been writers since the apostolic period; and here we have, in the writings of the great teachers of the church, another deposit of Christian experience. The truly catholic experience can be had from them if their general consensus of experience can be obtained. In respect to Christian doctrine, their common testimony in the shape of their prevailing opinions and their direct witness as to the value of certain forms of doctrine, will give the element which experience is fitted to contribute to the construction of the system of doctrine.

It is often supposed that there is no such consensus of opinion in the church. The variations existing are, indeed, plain enough upon a hasty examination. But the first impressions of confusion and complete disagreement will be removed if any student will dwell long enough, and will apply a true historical method to the study of the theme. Little by little order comes out of confusion. A current of doctrinal progress becomes plain. When the idea of the progressive construction through the ages of a common edifice of Christian doctrine is once formed, it becomes easier to see what is, and what is not, at any point, the true verdict of the church writers. In fact, as one studies, it sometimes seems as if men were nothing, in comparison with the ideas they bear; as if the mighty current of Christian truth were flowing down through the ages, adding to its volume with every successive period, and employing men, not as thinking originators of ideas, but as thinking machines for the local and momentary expression of itself,—it, the flowing current, being the real force, independent of, and above, men. While

such a view is not the truth, and is no philosophy of history, it illustrates, perhaps, the possibility of perceiving, when familiarity with the theme has given sureness and confidence to the historical judgment, what is the verdict of Christian experience at any point where it may have spoken with clear voice. In a word, since there is a science of the History of Christian Doctrine, the results of this may be used to gain a view of the consensus of Christian experience.

Particularly, the creeds which have at various times been adopted as the standards of the church may serve as an expression of common Christian experience. They exhibit great differences upon their very face, and thus they illustrate the limitations of churchly, catholic, experience, as is also illustrated in the case of individual experience. But beginning with the Apostles' Creed, so called, they also present a growing harmony as to an ever enlarging circle of truth, and thus illustrate the consensus of the church. The creeds show, for example, that it is a portion of indestructible and inseparable Christian doctrine, that in Christ there are two perfect and entire natures, human and divine; but they also show that no theory of the mode in which these two natures consist, can claim any such position. Thus affirmation and negation go side by side,—both instructive, and both unique as the utterance of this particular source of doctrine.

At some points the devotional utterances of the church will be found of the greatest aid. Pertaining, as they do, to the expression of the emotion felt in view of certain great fundamental and elementary truths, these have often surprising agreement in form in widely separated ages. But

able, ground, in devoting a moment to the special forms of experience found in the great denominations into which the Christian church is divided. It will be at once confessed by all that the experience of all bodies is not equally valuable, for differences of origin, environment, and denominational ideals will naturally make a difference in the range and normality of such experience. And yet, every communion has its own distinguishing features of experience, and it is the privilege of each to lay emphasis upon its own writers, hymns, liturgies, confessions, etc. Probably every considerable denomination stands at some point for some neglected element of Christian life or doctrine; and only as each emphasizes, within due limits, what is peculiar to itself, will Christendom be able to learn what each has to contribute to the common stock. Due modesty and the disposition to learn from others, combined with loyalty to church and to conviction, will produce by their mutual corrective tendency the desirable and good result sought.

The catholic Christian experience is, then, this; that verdict given at any point of Christian life or doctrine by the common consent of the church in its historical development.

The objection will probably occur at this point to some that Christian experience, as here treated, is nothing more nor less than the old Roman Catholic doctrine of an infallible church as the necessary interpreter of the Bible. But the objection is unfounded. There are great differences, as will soon be seen, which separate the proper from the Roman use of Christian experience by a wide gulf. Yet it must be acknowledged that there is, in the proposal to make a greater use of experience in dogmatic theology, an approach towards the Roman Church in the sense of an acknowledg-

it has nevertheless a great place by way of instruction and guidance. So far as this is true, it is of little consequence that it resembles Romanism. We do not feel ourselves bound strictly to all the conceptions of the Protestant fathers, though we call ourselves good Protestants. Even in the cardinal doctrine of justification by faith, we do not esteem faith to be exactly what they thought it to be, and, in direct opposition to Luther, ascribe to it true holiness, since it is a holy choice. So at this point, we may lay a new stress upon the use of the voice of the church, and still not go over to the Catholic position. In fact, Calvin often appealed to previous church teachers, such as Augustine and Bernard, in the way here proposed, and, indeed, built his whole "Institutes" upon the framework of the Apostles' Creed.

It may be well, then, to note that Christian experience is NOT

(1) Infallible. The church at several points has gone astray with one consent, as might almost be said, as when the evangelical voice of the Middle Ages was almost quenched, and the Roman system of theology was developing, with a substantial repetition of its worst features in the East. So at the present time it may be somewhere largely astray. God's providential design is evidently that there should be a gradual development of the knowledge of the truth, and this necessarily includes a faulty, or at least a partial, apprehension of it at many points. Or, in other words, as was said at the beginning, the experience of the church, while a source of doctrine, is not a normal source, or even the chief source. Only that book, the Bible, which still stands far ahead of all the attainments of any age, and was evidently

Christian experience as fully as from the Bible. But the doctrine of the Trinity, though suggested, indicated, or presupposed by experience, requires revelation to make it clear. In eschatology, though the existence of rewards and punishments is a very close induction from facts of the conscience, the individual experience can give no detailed deliverances upon the future world, nor has catholic experience much to say here. We may even say that Christian experience is not

(3) Always positive in its utterances. Let the question under consideration be the proper qualifications of communicants at the Lord's table, and the practice of the various churches has been so discordant that there can scarcely be said to be an utterance of catholic experience upon the subject. In fact, Christian experience is, at many points, like a harvest field, upon which the grain has grown with poor cultivation, in a hard soil, with little fertilization, and under unfavorable weather. It has, in spite of all this, come to something, and there are golden ears waiting to be gathered, but in spots here and there nothing worth harvesting will be found, and here and there blight and disease have spoiled all that grew. If in other fields the golden grain waves in glorious beauty and fruitfulness, here it is scanty and poor. Such is the history of the church; and so long as it remains upon earth, something of this will still be true.

A distinction should also be made carefully between the use here proposed of Christian consciousness and the exclusively subjective method employed by Schleiermacher and his followers in Germany. However much the church is indebted to Schleiermacher for having redirected attention to the "Christian consciousness" it cannot follow him in mak-

will be an air of exclusive subjectivity about the whole which will effectually destroy its use as a means of commending the gospel to the unbeliever,—one design of dogmatics, though not the chief design. Experience, in the broad sense here meant, considered as affording an important number of facts, is to be employed as any other collection of facts should be, according to its actual contents, upon the principles of all inductive reasoning, and should be used as it turns out to give results in harmony with other sources of information, so that the final result, the system, may be founded upon the combined testimony of all accessible witnesses, upon the united force of all relevant considerations. Should the system begin with the postulate of the church as an existing divine institution, as was advocated in a former article, and thus constitute a circle harmonious in itself and in a certain sense outside of the plane of natural reason, still, to continue the geometrical figure, the plane of the circle should be parallel to the plane of reason, and there should be innumerable connecting points of auxiliary argument, by which, if you please, the circle might be made to rest upon and thus be supported by that plane. A plea for Christian experience is not a plea for a one-sided system, and if there is, as Anglo-Saxons sometimes claim, any special faculty among us for round-about and common-sense views of things, it should preserve us from the error into which some followers of Schleiermacher have fallen.

But it is time this discussion should be nearing its close, and we may pass to a consideration of the advantages of the use of experience as a source of Christian doctrine.

ology which we have latterly neglected, such as the *Testimonium Spiritus Sancti*. But we may mention here

1. Improvement possible in the method of theology. A single illustration may suffice, though by no means the only one which might be suggested. The common method of proving the benevolence of God has been to bring forward the natural arguments for benevolence without aid from the Scriptures, since in the logical course of building up the system, the benevolence of God must be proved before the foundation is given for the argument for the Scriptures. In this way the full brunt of the objection to the divine benevolence from the existence of evil and sin has to be met* by the unaided reason. But after all, the character of God in its biblical fulness is not thus obtained, and the strongest proof of his benevolence, the giving of his Son, which is the constant appeal of the New Testament itself, must be omitted. But, now, Christian experience gives us the Bible at the very beginning of our system through the testimony of the Spirit. Christian experience also knows God as a Father. And hence the full biblical argument for the love of God made by the revelations of Calvary, may be developed as soon as the question of the moral attributes of God is reached, and the sweetness of divine truth poured in upon the mind before the questionings of the world are excited. When the remedy for sin is thus brought into the discussion before the objection to the benevolence of God from the existence of sin is presented, that objection is deprived of a large portion of its force. Sin must have some origin not inconsistent with the goodness of God, when our first sight of that goodness shows us its endeavor to remedy the existing evil. And, then, the benevolence derived from a glance at the regular sequences of nature is not the same as that derived from a sight of Calvary. The one is the benevolence of the wise and calm moralist; it lacks heart. The other is the love of the compassionate Father. The

former considers the needs of the logic of the schools more than the exigencies of life. Thus both in the method of proof, and in the character of the truth proved, the experiential theology has an advantage over the formal and rational.

♦2. Another example of the advantages of this method may be derived from the closer adherence to facts rendered necessary by it. I select the treatment of the essence of the church as an example. If the question be honestly asked of Christian experience, What constitutes the essence of the Christian church? it would seem that certain abstract theories of the church would be at once destroyed. The sacerdotalist, if not a mere theorist; will have received impulses of a religious character, and will have been spiritually fed where two things have been present, the preaching of the word, and the due administration of the sacraments. The Christian' experience is that under such circumstances the work of the church is done, and the Spirit is present, and "where the Spirit is, there is the church." Such seems to the writer at least to be the utterance of the individual Christian experience. Is it also the catholic experience? The creeds of the church may give answer. From the Augsburg Confession down, all the Protestant great confessions—Heidelberg, Belgic, Scotch Articles, English Articles, and the Westminster—teach this simple doctrine. Whatever place sacerdotalism may have had in the theology of any portion of these churches, no great confession has ever ventured to set up any other mark of the true church but the faithful preaching of the word and the right administration of the sacraments. Thus Christian experience, as a source of doctrine, holds us down to the facts, for it is absurd to say that the Spirit of God has not blessed any but those assemblies of Christians where the theory of apostolical succession or of immersional

relation to life, to facts; and Christian experience, as showing what works and how, will help banish the artificial products of mere theory-makers, from the living theology of the church.

3. A kind of solidity will be given to the structure of doctrine by the employment of Christian experience largely. It is the solidity that comes from the application of the test of experience to any theory. The attraction of gravitation derives its general acceptance not from the mathematical symmetry of its theoretical statement, but from the consideration that facts are found to correspond with it. The system of Christian doctrine may be presented as a deliverance of the pure reason, and may have with certain minds which may accept the proof given an added power from the fact that it is all immediately evident to the examining mind. Some minds have such self-sufficiency that what seems evident to themselves needs no other confirmation. But with men in general the fact that a system of thought has been built up slowly, and has commended itself to a variety of minds, is an additional element in the proof of its truth not to be underestimated. A churchly theology which is vague and pretentious may repel; but a churchly theology which is such because it has for it the carefully ascertained consent of the Christian ages, is a strong theology. If it is not, then it is weak only because the person to whom it seems weak does not believe in the progressive teaching of the church by the Holy Spirit, because there is but little sense in him of the supernatural in the world, because he lacks the characteristic elements of biblical faith.

4. The use of Christian experience largely will also tend

life of the church. It is doubtful whether the relation of Adam to the race has played any great part in deepening true repentance, though some are said to have repented of the sin they committed "in" him. The tendency seen now in the Presbyterian Church to bring forward the love of God into the foreground, and the tendency manifest in preaching, whether it gains a place in the revised Confession or not, to cause predestination to retreat to the background of the system, is also a tribute to the suggestions of Christian experience. And so, no doubt, it will be at other points. If the appeal to experience shall in fact effect such a readjustment of the proportions of the system of theology to the realities of life, bringing it into a closer relation to the *work* of the Spirit, it will doubtless also bring it into a closer relation to the *mind* of the Spirit, and thus greatly revitalize it.

5. We tread upon delicate ground when we suggest that the emphasizing of experience will possibly react upon our interpretation of the Bible. We are not to suppose that the interpretation gained by the regular laws of exegesis is to be overturned, certainly not that the plain meaning of the Scriptures is to be rejected for some contrary utterance of experience. But, as the attitude of an unbeliever towards the Bible is different from that of a believer, and he sees things in a wrong light where but a little living experience of religion would set them right, so the formal theologian, if he turn aside to question his heart, or to listen to other times and other men, will often find new truths upon the written page. The disposition to treat the Bible as a legal document for the purposes of the system needs always to be checked, and its character as a living book needs to be held before the mind. The proper attention to the individual subjective experience of the reader, since this is the same in essence with that of the writers of the word, will unlock many a passage otherwise dark. And even now, as in Luther's day, new doctrines may slowly be revealed. It

is natural that the forces of religion should first manifest themselves in the subconscious experience of Christians, and only slowly come to consciousness and recognition, just as the child receives the light of heaven, sees objects about it, but only slowly perceives how it sees, and what variegated aspect the many colored light lends to the objects of the external world. The Spirit of God operates whether we understand the laws he follows or not; and from the observation of the operation will come the knowledge of the law. So out of life lived will come life understood.

We have already noted that Christian experience possesses none of the characteristics of an infallible guide into the knowledge of the truth. The disturbing influences of sin, which is everywhere present in the church, effectually prevent this. Hence Christian experience can never be a standard of ultimate appeal. The Bible is such, for its own claims to authority, and the unquestioned fact of its lofty purity of precept and doctrine, render it worthy to be employed as an ultimate judge of truth. But is there in any sense authority for the construction of a system of doctrine in the utterances of Christian experience? I reply unhesitatingly, Yes; there is such authority in the utterances of Christian experience as comes from the fact that they are a real product of the teaching of the Holy Spirit in the church, and are accordingly a real, though not a pure, divine phenomenon. Now, just as natural history is to be learned by studying the facts of nature, so theology, which is, in some departments, the natural history of the renewed soul, is to be learned, not only by the instructions of men who spake under the immediate divine guidance, but also from the facts of the life of that renewed soul. All such facts have an authority: they either testify to the normal working of the Spirit, or to the abnormal growth of a depraved humanity. They are to be taken into the account by any

science which seeks to ascertain and estimate all relative facts; and systematic theology, at least such as will do the work of our day, must rest upon a complete examination of all accessible relative considerations. In this sense, then, Christian experience has an auxiliary, but not a co-ordinate, authority with the Bible in the determination of Christian doctrine: