

ARTICLE III.

THE CHRISTOCENTRIC THEOLOGY: A REVIEW
AND A CRITICISM.

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I.

THE history of the human spirit is the history of an ageless and tireless search after ultimate truth. This is the real quest of the Holy Grail. Truth that is relative and peripheral, that comes short of the absolute, that does not lie at the very center and heart of reality,—the universe is full of that, and they who seek it find. But it does not meet the imperious craving of the deeper soul of man. Pursued by a divine unrest, humanity enters every avenue and explores every realm of truth in search of this supreme verity. The world without and the world within suffer violence for the truth's sake. Door after door has flown open before the persistent probing of natural science. Secret after secret has yielded itself up, and yet science is as far from the ultimate truth as ever. Philosophy has fared far into the boundless mysteries of the life of the mind, and caught glimpses of the truth of truth, but philosophy, too, is baffled and unsatisfied for want of some principle or some Person who will solve the problem of the ultimate meaning of existence. With Plato, she still waits for one, "be it God or God-inspired man, who will teach us our religious duties and take away the darkness from our eyes." What if, as of old, there standeth One among us whom philosophy knows not! It is possible that philosophy and psy-

chology, which have hitherto left Christ wholly unheeded, may find in his unique consciousness an unexpected factor in the solution of their problems.

II.

“Man is the measure of all things,” was one of the profoundest words of ancient philosophy. What if that were true in an even profounder sense than he who said it dreamed! What if there were one Man so much nobler, more normal, more perfect, than all his fellows, as to become the standard of attainment and the goal of progress? Would not He, by the very fact of his supremacy, be the true measure of all things? Surely He would be the measure of humanity, for it is impossible to understand mankind save through the highest exponent. He would also be the Revealer of God, since God can be understood only through human manifestation. Of Nature, too, He would be the key, since Nature can only be understood through one whose perfect accord with her Author enables him to interpret her ultimate meaning.

If, as Lewes says, “we can understand the amoeba and the polyp only by a light reflected from the study of man,” and if we can understand man only through the perfect man. Christology and Science cannot be wholly unrelated.

It is a colossal claim, almost overwhelming in its scope and daring, that Jesus Christ is thus central in knowledge, in history, and in life. And yet the conviction has emerged again and again, in one form and another, in the history of thought, and steadily and inevitably we of to-day seem to be led toward a new and vastly larger affirmation of it in what has come to be known as the *Christocentric Theology*. With wide-open eyes to all that this centrality of Christ involves, in the reading of human history, in the interpretation of the universe, in the

apprehension of God, men of the profoundest thought and widest scholarship are turning to the Christocentric view, not as a scheme to re-enthroned Christianity, but in disinterested sincerity, as affording the only sufficient and satisfying solution of the problem of existence. To a brief sketch of the rise and progress of this Christocentric theology, let us first attend, and then to a consideration of its chief omission,—an omission that mars its self-consistency, and hinders its further development.

III.

Primitive Christian life and thought was Christocentric. To the disciples, Jesus was all in all. Paul found in Christ not only the absorbing passion of his life, but the power of God, and the wisdom of God, unto salvation. The author of the Fourth Gospel, in his profound meditation, found himself impelled to associate Jesus with the formative Principle of creation and the Light that lighteth every man coming into the world. The Greek theology, finding the nexus of philosophy and Christianity in this Logos doctrine, conceived Christ as the incarnate Reason that illumines the universe. Origen centered his rich and radiating system of theology in Christ. Athanasius, touching a deeper and more ethical spring, found in Christ's eternal Sonship not only the clue to the nature of God and of humanity, but also the link binding the two together. The Antiochian theology followed the Nicene in concentrating its thought upon Christ.

But with the rise of Western Christianity the doctrine of the centrality of Christ sank into subservience to that of the divine sovereignty as set forth by Augustine. The Augustine of the "Confessions" is centered upon Christ, but the Augustine of the "City of God" is absorbed in the problem of the church and the ground of its primacy. Augustinianism was perpetu-

ated by Calvinism. The authority of the church in Catholicism, and of the Bible in Protestantism, inevitably obscured the supremacy of Christ. It was not until, through the combined agency of philosophy and biblical criticism, Christianity was released from the bondage of authority, that a day dawned for the free reconstruction of Christology, and the reassertion of the Christocentric faith.

IV.

It is instructive to watch the current of a new movement in the realm of thought widen and deepen. One can see, by anticipation, spiritual fields fertilized and mill-wheels turned by it, if it be of sufficient force and significance. Such interest unquestionably attaches to the modern movement toward the Christologizing of theology, the re-reading of the universe in terms of the consciousness of Christ.

If we ask through whom this movement, in its modern form, took its rise, the name of Friedrich Schleiermacher, that great revivifier of spiritual theology, takes precedence of all others. "His it was to make Christ and his redemption the center of one of the most skillfully developed systems of theology which the Christian church has known," said Henry B. Smith, in his Andover address on "Faith and Philosophy." The movement which Schleiermacher thus instituted was carried forward by many able successors, among them Schweiizer, Neander, Rothe, and, above all, he whose motto was "Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge," Isaac August Dorner. The latter's monumental work, "The Doctrine of the Person of Christ," completed in 1856, together with his constant insistence upon the "universal significance of Christ" as "the productive archetype" and "objective historical center" of the higher life, exerted great influence in shaping thought in the direction of the Person of Christ.

The movement thus begun has progressed with characteristic distinctions in Germany, France, England, and America.

V.

In England, Coleridge, Thomas Arnold of Rugby, and Frederick D. Maurice prepared the way for a truer conception of Christ,—as did Thomas Erskine and McLeod Campbell in Scotland,—by exorcising scholasticism and formalism from theology, especially from Christology, and insisting upon sincerity and reality as the absolute prerequisites of a genuine theology. From the day that Maurice, with his searching, iconoclastic sincerity, thus cleared the way for a genuine Christology, religious thought in Great Britain has converged more and more toward the Person of Christ. "Ecce Homo" (1863), Robertson's "Sermons," and the Lives of Christ of Ederheim, Geikie, and Farrar helped in various ways to promote this cause. Liddon's Bampton Lectures on "Our Lord's Divinity," R. W. Dale's writings, A. B. Bruce's "Apologetics" and "Humiliation of Christ," have all furthered the movement. At the present time, the Christocentric theology, as represented in the Establishment by Canon Gore, and among the Free Churches by Principal Fairbairn, is unquestionably the vital and dominant theology. In addition to Canon Gore's work on the "Incarnation," and Principal Fairbairn's "Place of Christ in Modern Theology" and "Philosophy of Christianity," this movement has given us "Lux Mundi," and James Orr's comprehensive and scholarly volume, "The Christian View of God and the World," with its able exposition of the principle that the Person of Christ is "necessarily central in his own religion, nay, in the universe." Upon the same lines are working, with great enthusiasm tempered by fine scholarship, D. W. Forrest,—whose work on "The Christ of History and of Experience," is one of the most suggestive

contributions to the discussion,—J. R. Illingworth, Robert Horton, Principal Forsyth, and others who are leading the religious thinking of Great Britain to-day.

Returning to Germany, whatever may be said in criticism of the theological apostasy of Ritschlianism, with its motto "Back to Christ," it is assuredly a Christocentric movement. Christ is its chiefest *Werthurtheil*. In so far, at least, it is apostolic in its character, and should win from every earnest Christian the Pauline thanksgiving for all means by which, in whatever way, Christ is proclaimed. Hermann and Kaftan center theology in Christ; and Harnack himself,—that electric battery of present-day theology—(though in his own way) is essentially Christocentric in his position. "Harnack is not less convinced than Ritschl of the uniqueness and originality of Jesus Christ. If we ask where we are to find the essence of Christianity, Harnack answers in a word, 'In Jesus Christ and in his gospel.'" ¹

VI.

America has not been wanting in her appreciation of the significance of the Christocentric movement, nor in her contributions to its advancement. Henry B. Smith was the prophet of the movement in this country, and as early as 1849, in the memorable address already alluded to, lifted high and clear the banner of the new theology in the memorable words, "Christianity is not only an historic revelation and an internal experience, but also an organic, diffusive, plastic, and triumphant force in human history; and in this history, as in the revelation and in the experience, the center round which all revolves is the person of Jesus Christ." But it was not given to Henry B. Smith to work out the large conclusions of this far-sighted inspiration. Before that could be accom-

¹ Wm. Adams Brown, *Essence of Christianity*, p. 281.

plished, it was necessary that some one should do in America a work analogous to that of Maurice in England, and restore to Christology reality and freedom. That was the part so nobly played, and at such cost, by Horace Bushnell. Next to the works of Bushnell, probably no theological treatise in this country has been at once so emancipatory and constructive as Elisha Mulford's "Republic of God."

The history of the Christocentric movement in America is too fresh and familiar to need repetition. The principle and motive of it received a comprehensive statement from Professor Egbert C. Smyth, in the initial number of the *Andover Review*, in which he wrote: "God is revealed in Christ. The possibility, the unity, the unification, of a science of Theology are given in Him and in Him alone."

As the wider Christocentric movement has advanced, it has won for itself here, as in Great Britain, the allegiance of many of the keenest and most active minds, both in pulpit and seminary chair. Dr. George Gordon is one of its most earnest advocates. President A. H. Strong, Dr. A. H. Bradford, and Dr. Wm. Newton Clarke have in various ways interpreted the Christocentric theology. The late lamented Professor Stearns of Bangor enthusiastically adopted it in his inaugural, and reaffirmed it in his address before the London International Council. President King, in his notable volumes "The Reconstruction of Theology" and "Theology and the Social Consciousness," has made a most valuable contribution to Christology. Dr. McConnell's "Christ," a book at once stimulating and superficial, takes the Christocentric position. The number of Lives of Christ that have appeared within the last twenty years, and are still appearing, evidences the unflagging interest in the historic Christ. Professor William Adams Brown, of Union Seminary, in his recent volume "The Es-

sence of Christianity,"—a clear and effective study in theology,—states the conclusion of his research as follows: "Would we express in a sentence what makes the genius of Christianity as a historic religion, we cannot do so better than by saying that it is the progressive realization, in thought as in life, of the Supremacy of Christ."

Sufficient evidence has been adduced, perhaps, to indicate how wide-spread, how vital, and how thoroughly an outgrowth of our own period, is this renewed Christologizing of theology.¹ That it has for many years been recognized as the dominating principle of modern theology is witnessed by the statement of Professor Fisher, when, at the close of his "History of Doctrine," in summing up the present doctrinal situation, he concludes: "The question of the implication of Christ's person and work forms the rubrics of the modern theological system."

VII.

How far has this movement proceeded toward its completion? What are its assets? How much remains for it to accomplish? What new problems confront it?

By far the largest constructive and carrying power in the Christocentric school at present belongs to the work of Principal Fairbairn in England, and of Dr. George A. Gordon in this country. The former, upon a canvass of such magnitude as only he can cover, has given us such a presentation of the "architectonic" nature of Christianity, as it centers in Christ—its range, its significance, its supremacy, as it is related to other religions and to racial needs,—as affords to Christianity

¹How far this revival of interest in Christology is a modern tendency may be seen by noting the proportionate place given to Christology in a comprehensive system of Theology of an earlier day, such as Hodge's, which consists of three large volumes: I. Theology; II. Anthropology; III. Soteriology and Eschatology.

a new conception of its commission and conquering power as the universal religion. The latter, Dr. Gordon, in "The Christ of To-day," "The New Epoch for Faith," and "Ultimate Conceptions of Christianity," has given us a no less inspiring interpretation of the intensive, as contrasted with the extensive, relation of Christ to human life and to our civilization, which he has so permeated that it can neither understand itself nor realize its ends apart from him.

And yet, with all this advance of thought in the direction of Christ, we have had as yet but an introduction, an outline, a foreword, of a Christocentric, or as Dr. Gordon calls it a Christomorphic, theology. The principle has been clearly stated, the method justified, the sufficiency of the Christ personality demonstrated, but progress is arrested. It still remains to show how nature and humanity are to be interpreted through Christ. The Christocentric theology is at a standstill, and for this reason: *The historic Christ (to whom the modern Christocentric thought has confined itself) alone is insufficient to interpret either humanity or nature.* The difficulty is, that nature and humanity were here before Jesus. Unless, therefore, Jesus was intimately related to a Logos, who was before him, nature and humanity explain him, rather than he them.

Thus the great obstruction and limitation of the Christocentric theology is its failure to give full recognition to what is known as the "prehistoric" or "essential" Christ, and, consequently, its failure to relate the prehistoric Christ to the historic Christ, the essential Christ to the actual Messiah, the Logos to Jesus. With a thrill of insight and joy, the new theology has caught the universal significance of Jesus as the new science of history has disclosed him. Not until the evolutionary principle had reconstructed the conception of history was it possible to realize how commanding and constructive

a place Jesus Christ occupies in human history. It is no wonder that the new theology, smitten with the splendor and significance of this new disclosure of the centrality of Jesus, has confined its attention to this illuminating fact, and failed to coordinate with it the fact of the presence of a religious nature and a spiritual Presence in humanity before the Incarnation.¹

It is this limitation of view, this concentration upon the historic and individual in Christ, to the neglect of the inner, eternal, less definable, more universal in him, that has caused the reluctance and protest, which have all along accompanied the new theology, on the part of many philosophical and comprehensive minds. If Christianity can be wholly reduced to historic terms and centered in Jesus Christ, what of those fundamental and underlying elements in Christianity which are common to all religions, and which seem to be an innate possession of the human soul, a part of man so far as he can be detached from a historic setting?

The time has come when the Christocentric theology must either enlarge its conception and its interpretation of Christ, or surrender its position. In order to be the center of the historic movement, Christ must be more than this; he must be the center and power of the whole sphere of the religious life of man, Christian and non-Christian, past and future, elemental and developed, primitive and perfected.

VIII.

As a matter of fact, this is where the New Testament places Christ,—by implication at least. The Logos of the Fourth Gospel is declared to be the Light that lighteth every man coming

¹ The Ritschlian theology is surprisingly narrow and short-sighted here. "The distinction," says Kaftan, "drawn between a historical and ideal Christ involves the destruction of our faith in the Christian revelation" (*Dogmatik*, p. 404).

into the world. Paul's "Spiritual Rock" that followed the Hebrews, and of which they drank, was Christ. The great apostle (who else would have been great enough to frame the conception?), in the Epistle to the Colossians, refers to Christ as the "mystery which hath been hid for ages and generations, but now hath been manifested to the saints." Christ is no stranger, new-come to earth. He has been in humanity from the beginning as a mystic Presence, a Hope of glory,¹ and when the Word became flesh, the mystery became a manifestation, the light of the Logos shone in the face of Jesus, and men knew not only that this was he of whom Moses and the prophets wrote, but he of whom moral judgment and spiritual intuition had spoken. The dim outline of the Mystery blended with the clear radiance of the Manifestation and they became one.²

Here is an interpretation of Christ and of Christianity large enough in scope, and deep enough in intensity, to support a Christocentric theology. It relates Christ to all humanity. It takes possession, in the name of Christ, not only of the realm of history, but of pre-history and of extra-history. Why then has it not had wider recognition? Why has not the church more readily recognized the lineaments of the Logos in Jesus, of the prehistoric Christ in the historic Christ? Probably because of the difficulty of recognizing personality apart from individuality. Because the Christ who was with men before the Incarnation was featureless, formless, many

¹"A mixture of the thought of the historical with that of mystical redemption is to be traced in the majority of the Greek teachers. It is Christ in us, the cosmical Christ." See Harnack's *History of Dogma*, Vol. iii. p. 303.

²That this representation of Christ is given in the New Testament did not wholly escape even Calvin, who defined the gospel as "the clear manifestation of the mystery of Christ," yet confined the Christ mystery to the Old Testament.

fail to recognize him as personal, and conceive of him as an Influence, a Spirit, or oftener still as an Energy, an Aspiration, a Virtue, an Idea of the human mind itself. This mistake eventuates in the notion that man saves himself. God is only a *pou sto*, or a goal, or both, to aid the all-sufficient, all-attaining human spirit in its upward progress.

But personality, which is the real essence and substratum of individuality, can exist apart from individuality. Individuality comprises the external, the incidental, the expressive, elements of being; personality the essential, the intrinsic, the eternal elements. The personal Logos, not Jesus, is preëxistent.

The Personality that had been in the universe from the beginning, in humanity from its aspiring breath, immanent, diffused, invisible, in Jesus of Nazareth became visualized, incarnated, individualized, as the moisture that fills the atmosphere takes form in the raindrop or the snowflake.¹

This was the divine efflorescence of Nature, this the radiant consummation of history, when He who had stood behind the veil from eternity, the active Principle, nay the active Personality, of all righteousness and beauty and truth, stood forth before men, the Mystery become the Manifestation. In Jesus Christ, the adorable Son of the Father, "we beheld the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

This all-potent Person, this burning Luminary emerging from the mists of the ages, gives us the new Copernican theory

¹ This conception, the germs of which are found in the New Testament, becomes very prominent and potent among the Fathers. Origen, especially, emphasizes it, as when he says: "All who are rational beings are partakers of the Word, i. e. of Reason, and by this means bear certain seeds implanted within them of wisdom and justice which is Christ."

"Athanasius thought of an indwelling (of the Logos) before the Incarnation, an indwelling wholly independent of it." Harnack.

of the spiritual realm, and, as the central orb of the spiritual system, throws his beams backward to the very beginning of all creation, and forward to the consummation of all things in himself.

IX.

Nor is this Person—this is essential to the understanding of him—merely a revealing Personality, but an enabling Personality. That is, he is accompanied, in a measure that the prehistoric Christ could not be, by the Holy Spirit. It is his not only to reveal the Father, but to enable men to reach the Father. Revealing the Father without potentializing man were an unavailing and insufficient service. Christ does far more than that. No better instance of the enabling power of Jesus Christ can be found than that contained in the “Confessions” of Augustine. In describing his progress into the light, Augustine thus refers to the influence upon him of Platonism: “By the study of the Platonist books I was taught to seek for the incorporeal Truth, and beheld Thy invisible things understood by the things that are made, and though cast back, I felt what the dullness of my soul did not permit me to gaze upon, I had no doubt that Thou art, and that Thou are infinite. . . . Of all this I was convinced, yet was I too weak to enjoy Thee. I prated like One who knew, yet, unless I found Thy way in Christ our Saviour, what I deemed true, was like to end in rue.”¹

In these words is disclosed, through the medium of a personal experience, that which is, equally with revelation, the great office of the Son of God—to impart not only sight but strength, not only the knowledge of the Infinite, but strength to enjoy him,—without which strength, knowledge is but a mocking futility.

¹ Chapter xx.

X.

It is in enabling power, as well as in revealing power, that Jesus, the incarnate, visualized, individualized, Christ, exceeds the Logos, the Mystery, the prehistoric Christ, thus constituting Christianity the universal religion. The Person who moved, darkling and indistinct, behind the forces of Nature and within the heart of Humanity, could not, *ipso facto*, have the same commanding glory as when he stood forth, visual and distinct, upon the field of history. If we ask, Why then was not the manifestation easier made? the answer is, It could not be. In order to be historical, the Incarnation must needs occur at some point in history. That point, that moment, was the divinely opportune one. "In the fullness of time God sent forth his Son." Nothing could lend such centrality and significance to the Incarnation as an historical event, as to have it the unfolding and outshining of a Reality, a Personality, already perceived and felt, but not clearly understood,—rather than the advent of a new and hitherto unknown manifestation of the Godhead. No amount of preparation for such a cataclysm could explain it or leave it other than an unrelated and erratic event, breaking in upon the Divine method and order.

An Incarnation following and fulfilling an Immanence, an outstanding forthshowing of an indwelling Christ—an incarnation of an Eternal Logos—this is the order, this is the method, according to the New Testament, of the Divine Revelation. Here is the blending of experience and history, of the vision of the heart and the vision of the eyes. This is the necessary basis and *rationale* of the Christocentric theology. Upon this basis, and upon this only, can a Christocentric theology be founded, which shall be comprehensive enough to include, interpret, and fulfill all the facts, historical and experimental, external and spiritual, temporal and eternal, that make up

Revelation. Such a Christ, in whom the Eternal Reason is incarnated and the historic Jesus glorified, advances with ever surer step to the supreme place in human thought and life. Of him we may say, as does Browning's aged John in "The Death in the Desert":—

"I say, the acknowledgment of God in Christ,
Accepted by thy reason, solves for thee
All questions in the earth and out of it,
And has so far advanced thee to be wise."