

## ARTICLE III.

## DOGMA AND LIFE.

BY THE REVEREND BURNETT THEO. STAFFORD.

[It gives me pleasure to commend the principles and teaching of this article by the Rev. B. T. Stafford, on "Dogma and Life." It is certain as anything can be that there is an immovable substratum of truth underlying every Divine manifestation, which the human mind may elucidate and view from different points, but can never change. And it is so that the Christian life and civilization are built up on the unchangeable facts of the Incarnate Life of the Son of God. We may meditate on those facts and see more and more of their wondrous significance, now emphasizing one feature and now another; but to deny their reality and call that "spiritual interpretation," is to put our own vain fancies in the place of God's revelation, and to trick out our unbelief with a deceptive appearance of faith. It will not do. It destroys the foundations, and leaves us a mere human philosophy in the place of a divine religion. No such philosophy ever has been, or ever will be, able to withstand the active resistance and antagonism of human selfishness.—CHARLES TYLER OLMSTED, D.D., D.C.L., Bishop of the Diocese Central New York.]

THE seeker after truth does not go very far before he comes to the background of mystery. Over it he cannot climb, and through it he cannot dig. At various points and in inexplicable ways, through it come the streams of life and power. They come in an order, fixed and harmonious. Sometimes their lines of action seem to clash: full knowledge of their operation and end makes it clear that they all combine in a most wonderful way to produce results of unsurpassable beauty and beneficence. The wise investigator soon concludes that it is a waste of time and energy to speculate on this background of mystery: it is here round about him, above and beneath him, and certain it is that through it come the streams of creative energy. His chief and constant privilege is to accept

it, and then by study endeavor to understand the laws governing the manifested life proceeding from it. Always and everywhere, the points of human contact with this background of mystery are the same. On them rests all sound and enduring knowledge, and apart from them there is no life. They are the dogmas—the fixed decrees of the Almighty God—the premises of constructive thought and sound conclusion. One of its dogmas—fixed and unvariable voices—is that  $2 \times 2 = 4$ . The one delighting in the speculation which comes from an untrained imagination, or a rebellious will, may try to convince himself, and others, that it will not matter much if it be said that  $2 \times 2 = 3$  or  $5$ ; for, after all, it is the mere matter of accepting a mathematical tradition, which had its origin in the rude beginnings of savage life. People are cultivated and intelligent now, and why not supplant this old dogma with a new and up-to-date one? His point of view is entirely different from, and diametrically opposed to, the supposed savage mathematician who knew nothing at all about evolving the science of numbers out of his active, or sub, consciousness. He simply took things as he found them in nature and as written on the background of mystery, and these dogmas in turn entirely harmonized with the laws of his own mind. On the substantial dogma involved rests the movement of the stars in their courses; it pledges the light of the sun to make the day glorious and the moon to mellow the darkness of the night.

In the realm of chemical life,  $H_2O$ ,  $SO_4$  states affinities and suggests combinations of untold potencies, at once stupendous and startling. Their formulas are known in part: with the patient translation of the signs on the wall of the background of mystery, new chemical dogmas are uncovered, which may, indeed, cause men to step lightly on the stable earth and also

look with confidence to the future day when so many of their present enemies shall have been brought into subjection. Neither metaphysics nor argument gives existence to these: investigation uncovers them for the ban or blessing of men. Whether the dogmas thus found are closely followed, or otherwise, when used, makes all the difference in the world. A strange physician, indeed, would he be, who, in the administration of poisons, advised their careless use. In the realm of herb and grain and fruit, the controlling dogma is that everything within its family lines produces after its kind. So is it with the beast of the field, and man made in the image of his Maker. For a good many decades inquisitive minds have been earnestly hunting the earth for the connecting-link between man and monkey. The well-defined result is that their clearly stated theories constitute the strongest confirmation. All the external evidence results in *Not Proven*. In the realm where men deal for gain with the products of the field, the mountain, and the factory, the dogma of giving a just return for that which is received controls to the last degree. Obedience to it yields satisfaction to one of the greatest, most constant, and powerful cravings of the human soul. It also fills the social atmosphere with a happy confidence and respect.

In a still higher world of thought, emotion, and association, namely, political life, there is a central and controlling dogma. Centuries ago, the Prophet who came from Galilee gave it distinct statement and forced it into the political thought of the world: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." It was not entirely new, since, long before, Moses had ordered that "there should be one law for the stranger and the home-born within the gate." The Prophet of the North stated the dogma for the very sources of life. Law is formal and external: love originates and dominates the life of the soul; it

broods and gives existence to the soul's controlling motive. For social prosperity and strength, men must love one another. Since this dogma was forced into the political thought and action of the world, remarkable things have happened. The old heathen philosophy of the associated life has been broken and cast down: the present day is witnessing its expulsion from the schools of learning and the halls of legislation. Just as fast as social readjustment can be accomplished, so as to preserve the principle of continuity, this dogma of neighborliness is compelling the rearrangement of the organic forces of the associated life. Even dim and reluctant eyes are compelled to see the distinct rays of a better day, while those in whose souls it has performed the miracle of creating the ability to know the luxury of helping others, the immediate social future is very full of good and wholesome things.

An old dogma which has to do with the individual for his culture and growth is, "By the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread." Work is the great civilizer and builder. By labor and self-denial, by honest defeat and ultimate success, the substantial ends of life are realized in victorious character. In every community the physical, mental, and moral workers are the most highly civilized in themselves, and outside send forth the most compelling, beneficent influence. All the contribution of this Western world to the sum of human betterment before the coming of the European was that of "the leisure class." It hunted, and canoed, and fished, and was devoted to physical culture, year in and out. During the last century in this country, there were organized sixty communistic bodies with the declared intent of escaping the demands of this dogma, or of rendering them obedience in the very lowest terms. Furthermore, in most cases, to make sure of success, only "desirable people" were eligible to member-

ship. All these industrial and social organizations have long since collapsed, and the personal and associated blessedness of intelligent and honest toil is still expressed by the old dogma, "By the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread."

Religions which have come into existence as the result of meditation have given answer to some soul need. In an accommodating sense, this may be said to have served the place of dogma. Growth has followed as far as the spiritual craving of the soul has been defined. "There is no God but God," declared Mohammed. It appealed to the monotheistic instinct, and accordingly called forth successful opposition to polytheism. The spiritual content of the divine nature and propriety he did not explain, because of not understanding them. He declared the mere existence of the one God; this is an essential but small part of the dogma of the Godhead. And so of all the religions which have come from meditation—have been evolved from the religious consciousness: in every instance the involved truth has been either over- or under-stated; and then, in the attempt to meet the need of the soul, has been exaggerated out of all semblance. This has neither changed nor removed the substantial spiritual craving: it has remained to give a true and full response when awakened by the divine touch.

The source of redemptive Christian thought and life is the fact and dogma of the Incarnation and Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ, our Divine Lord. The process by which the Incarnation was accomplished is clearly stated by St. Luke and St. Matthew. No wonder that Mary was perplexed when the angel said to her: "Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found favor with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son." And what more natural and innocently sweet and pure that she should ask: "How shall this be, see-

ing I know not a man? And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee: wherefore also the holy thing which is begotten shall be called the Son of God." The account of Joseph's troubled state of mind over the fact that Mary was "found with child of the Holy Ghost," and the remedy, is thus given by St. Matthew: it shows his great and tender goodness of heart: and he, "being a righteous man, and not being willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily. But when he thought on these things, behold an angel of the Lord appeared unto him, saying: Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost."

It is evident that in the Incarnation, Almighty God took upon himself human nature, and so entered into the vital life of men. Its one object was the manifestation of "the fullness of the Godhead," from beyond the background of spiritual mystery, for the redemption of the world. "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us . . . full of grace and truth." Those who were with him from the beginning always testified to the same effect. No other thought of his person ever found expression in either word or emotion, Before Pontius Pilate he confessed the same. In answer to the final and crucial question of the high priest, he confessed and denied not, and in a way than which nothing could have been more solemn. To the attacking Pharisees, he declared, "Before Abraham was, I am." That put an end to further discussion. On another occasion they threw down the just challenge that none but God could forgive sins. He at once took it up by saying to the sick of the palsy that his sins were forgiven him, and that he should return to his own home.

Again, the moral consciousness of men is to the effect that from God alone can come eternal life. And so, when "a certain ruler" came to our Divine Lord, and, calling him good, asked what he should do to inherit eternal life, this truth was emphasized to the last degree by Christ. The ruler did not grasp to any marked degree the profound significance of the interpretation put upon his words: the fault was in himself and not in the One who made it. The superhuman and supernatural force of his Personality made a deep and abiding impression on his malignant enemies. Speaking after the manner of men, they had compassed his death, and still were in a state of apprehensive uncertainty. At the time, the mightiest power on earth was Rome. Accordingly her guard was placed at the tomb. Still they were restless, and concluded, if anything happened, to fix it up with a lie and gold.

There is abundant evidence that the apostles grew in their spiritual measurement of the true character of the One they loved to the last degree and rejoiced to call Master. The same is true of the apostolic church; indeed, the same fact has increasing confirmatory evidence in all the Christian generations. This is entirely normal, and harmonious with human understanding of all the manifestations of energy which have come to the knowledge of men through the background of mystery. The Greeks and Hebrews knew there was such a thing as electricity: they simply apprehended it as fact; it is only within recent years that this fact or dogma has been in any appreciable measure understood and harnessed to do work. The lines of electrical life and power have always been the same as now: the human mind has grown in ability to trace and use

<sup>1</sup>One desirous to follow this subject further should read Professor Ramsay's "Was Christ Born in Bethlehem?" and R. J. Knowling's "The Testimony of St. Paul to Christ."

them. This constitutes the sum total of electrical progress. Whenever proved data have been left, failure has come swift and sure. The same is true of economical advance. Substantial progress has been gained by rendering obedience to the controlling dogma. Schemes like John Law's South Sea Island project have collapsed and brought ruin and suffering to many.

There is no evidence that at Pentecost the apostles had anything like a clear idea of the world-wide work before them; but, because of their Hebrew cast of mind and education, they were entirely clear that their labors should be along well-defined lines. And so St. Luke says that the church "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread and the prayers." The object for writing his Gospel was "to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us," that is, the first Christian believers. It is clear that "the doctrine of the apostles" was a very real and substantial thing in the church from the very first. Force and importance is given to St. Luke's statement of fact, when it is remembered that he was highly educated, and accordingly used words with care and precision. The other apostle of culture speaks definitely of "the form of sound words." Over and again he is particular to express solicitude for sound doctrine. In his final admonition to Timothy as Bishop of Ephesus, St. Paul says: "Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me." All through this second Epistle, the same earnest concern is found that "the faith once for all delivered to the saints" should be held fast, since the time was at hand when teachers would speak so as to please itching ears. All this is emphasized to the limit of clearness; when it is kept in mind that St. Paul is speaking of objective reality. He never uses



the word faith or belief in the sense of theological opinion. Further still, the act of believing was the act of receiving or confessing this objective spiritual reality.<sup>1</sup> There was, therefore, in the earliest days of the church, a creed—a body of

<sup>1</sup>The same truth is forcefully stated in the following words:—

“If the Christian Religion were the result of mere subjective theorizing and speculation, if it were only the best philosophy of God and human life that men have so far been able to evolve out of their own thinking, it would be quite natural and reasonable to ask for a revision of the statements contained in the Creed. Our Dissenting brethren who take this view of religion are entirely logical in regarding all creeds as unimportant and as subject to constant revision.

“But the Apostolic and Catholic Church does not so understand and never has so understood Christ’s Religion.

“The belief of this Church, the belief which speaks in every page and every line of her Prayer Book, the belief to which her people will hold as to their very lives, is that the Christian Religion is not a theory that we may throw aside or a speculation to be superseded by some more clever speculation, but that it is a divine revelation, and not even *a* but *the* divine revelation of God Himself, given to us in the person and the presence in this world of that One who ‘for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made Man,’ and who has promised to be with us always even unto the end of the world.”

“The proposal to attract men into the Church by throwing aside the Faith of the Church reveals a strange misapprehension of the present religious situation.

“Men are not looking to-day for a Church which is uncertain as to her own Faith, a Church which offers them no surer help than the private speculations of her individual teachers, a Church whose chief concern is to accommodate her Gospel to every passing theory of science and every changing opinion of men.

“What men feel the need of to-day above all is the note of certainty, that accent of divine authority which is heard in the message of divine truth; they feel the need of a Church which speaks to them in the confidence of a certain faith, with the comfort of a reasonable, religious, and holy hope, a Church which comes to them with a message which their souls know and recognize and respond to as a message from above.” (From the Baccalaureate Sermon, at the University of the South, 1906, by the Rev. William T. Manning, D.D., Assistant Rector of Trinity Parish, New York.)

sound doctrine, a form of sound words. This was the Apostles' Creed. There is no need in this connection to deal with its first literary expression. The instance is that, before it became literature, it had been long used by Christian congregations in divine worship and for the ends of spiritual instruction. In opposition to this position, it is sometimes said that "the words of Jesus are preferred." But what is the significance of the words of Jesus? and who has best known them? Those men whom he personally called and ordained to the Christian ministry, and taught his doctrine, and who formulated it and preached it at least one generation before a single word was reduced to writing? Those men who lived and moved and had their spiritual being in the very revealed presence of the Son of God? or the theological speculators of to-day? Evidently, to such questions, there can be only one answer. Then it is again said, that the religion or creed of the Bible is the religion or creed to be held fast. But what religion or creed is meant? There is every sort in the Bible. The whole circle of religious experience is covered. There is that of Moloch and Baal and Ashtoreth and Bacchus and Jupiter, and Agnosticism, and the Hindoo worship of the cow, and so on to the end. The Christian creed is that of the apostles.

The central dogma of this creed is that of the Incarnation and Virgin Birth. And this is so because by it the nature and property of the Godhead are defined and established. The native spiritual apprehension of the soul that there is a God, by the Incarnation is explained to the fullest degree. What he is in himself and motive is made clear to the minds of men. It uncovers and reveals, in the daylight of fullest personal expression, the divine life. Before, men of the highest reaches of thought had speculated as to what the divine nature and character might be; since it became a part of human history

and experience, they have the objective demonstration of the divine life lived victoriously in the known conditions and terms of the humblest and greatest. By it the law of sacrifice and service is made organically fundamental and constructive: along its lines are grown contentment of soul and enlargement of thought: apart from it discontent with self and the world grows rank and strong. "Freely ye have received, therefore, freely give," states the motive of the spiritual code, which, for human betterment, has come from the background of mystery. By it the poles of moral and intellectual power have been charged. The motive of selfish self-seeking is branded as monstrous and unworthy. So the creed compels men to reason. In the Nicæan symbol both the motive and the end of the Incarnation are stated in words which ever are those of strength and rest to believing hearts. "*Who [the living God] for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried.*" With the enthusiastic message which came from souls elevated and inspired by this dogma, the apostles, and other missionaries of the *Cross*, went to the conquest of a world hardened in selfishness. The religious and social standards of both Jew and Greek were judged and condemned. The Jew reasoned that possibly for him the God of his fathers would do all this, but never for the Gentile. The cultured Greek found his religious notions upset: this did not matter very seriously; but when the new religion brushed away all his social standards, it became intolerable. He would have nothing at all to do with the God who obligated him to reach out the helping and elevating hand to the slave and barbarian. He was by no means without definite ideas of one superior and overruling mind. The severe criticism of his

speculative thought had compelled this; but, with a religious dogma which necessitated the social life of sacrifice and service, he would have nothing at all to do.

Meanwhile the Gospel of the Incarnation had made wonderful progress. Quietly, but definitely, it was building within the Empire a powerful society with new motives and ends. The philosopher's argument, of *impossible* and *absurd*, was overthrown by actual accomplishment. Then it was conceded that the words of Jesus had "wonderful religious beauty, ethical charm, and a sublime social optimism." He certainly must have been a manifestation of the Living God, but not the absolutely final one. The reply of the church was that she believed "*in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God: begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, Begotten not made, Being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made; who for men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man.*" It may be remarked, in passing, that, should the Apostolic and Catholic Church formulate to-day a new definition of the Incarnation, that possibly a somewhat different phraseology would be used; but this one has stood the severest test of centuries that any statement of dogma could possibly have, and has done increasingly victorious service all the time. With the conclusion of the Nicæan Council, Arianism was not removed from men's minds: error is never disposed of by any such method. It lived on, but with decaying power and influence. On the other hand, those bishops, and presbyters, and deacons, and celibates who accepted into good and honest hearts the gospel of the Incarnation, went forth aggressively to the spiritual conquest of the world. These were the ministers of the *Cross*,

who planted it in the wild and fierce savagery of the West, and in time, by the refining process of divine grace, laid deep in rude peoples the principles of an imperishable civilization. Those religious bodies which broke away from the Catholic Church and apostolic teaching and taught men that human nature has within itself the potency of self-perfectability, perished long ago. Or, if relics of them remained, they have all along done very little other work than protest against the dogma of the Incarnation. Long ago spiritual starvation would have come upon men, for all they could have given them. The divine promise, that is, the law of grace, has operated for nineteen hundred years through this dogma. You go and tell all nations that which you have seen and heard, "teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you," said the risen Lord, "and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." Through this dogma has coursed, and now courses, the Light which lighteth the world.

That which has been true in this matter is now true. During the last generation and more, there has been remarkable religious activity, with a careful tabulation of results. The fact is in the clear daylight of accomplishment, that those religious bodies which have held gladly and intelligently to this dogma have lengthened their cords and have strengthened their stakes. More than this, those theological teachers who have felt the living power of this dogma in their own souls, and have given sanction to its influence in originating and directing their mental action, have poured into candidates for the Christian ministry the old-time zeal to bring men to the foot of the *Cross* for spiritual healing. They have had a message both positive and aggressive. Accordingly, men such as love the truth have listened, accepted, and been added to the

number of the saved. On the other hand, those theological teachers who have apologized for this dogma as found in the Nicæan Creed "as Greek metaphysics," and have expressed the grave belief that "it cannot be sustained in a philosophical way," have muddled and stagnated the thought and spiritual aspirations of those who would be taught, that they in turn might teach the flock of God. There is no space in this connection to discuss the matter, but the philosophy of man and the world which originates in and comes from the Incarnation is the one which explains the fact and content of life, and now as never before is compelling the rearrangement of the reconstructive social and religious forces.

It were too long a task to trace the process of the degradation of dogma into contempt by making it equal theological opinion by both Romanist and Puritan. As things are to-day, and as the direct result of this degradation, there is a painful confusion of mind over dogma and dogmatism. Almighty God made dogma: overconfident and self-inflated men indulge lavishly in dogmatism both in science and theology. Dogma is fixed and final. Dogmatism, being personal opinion, fluctuates. All depends on which ecclesiastical party is dominant in the Roman Curia, or in some council or synod. Dogma invites men to crave earnestly more knowledge of the life from beyond the background of mystery: dogmatism is all the time on guard, and cries out, "Hands off: it has all been measured; expect no more." Dogma fills the scientific mind with enthusiasm, because dogma blazes the certain way to larger and more glorious discovery. The one given to dogmatism is nervous and apprehensive, lest his opinions be shaken and overthrown: the one anchored to dogma rests in peace and enjoys the luxury of growth of soul. His opinions are of importance to him; more still, they are necessary, because he thinks and

reasons. But in no way does the dogma depend upon them. Those religious bodies rejecting or sloughing the dogma of the Incarnation as the primal and originating source of all Christian truth, by a committee or a count of heads, set up one, or more, of their own devising, and then attempt spiritual instruction. Dogma is absolutely essential in all teaching, whether of science or theology. As well attempt to get on in theology without dogma as in geometry without axioms. To try to get along without either one is as reasonable as to expect language without grammar, or argument without logic. There is always latent in the human mind rebellion to fundamental truth, because it requires obedience with an authority at once constant and exacting.

In the past there have been various deflections from "the faith once for all delivered to the saints." At the present, the one most prominent seems to be that of diving down into the social and religious consciousness of the race for safe beginnings. There is nothing new to it. When subjected to the last analysis, it is found to mean the self-perfectability of human nature. Once this is accepted, it does not take long for the logical faculty to reach the conclusion, that the revealed sacrifice of grace and forgiveness and redemptive love in the Incarnation is not fundamentally essential. All such deflections have soon spent their force, and the needy hearts of men have returned to the dogma of grace to be fed and made strong by the healing energy by it transmitted. As it has been, so shall it be unto the end.