

# BIBLIOTHECA SACRA

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## ARTICLE I.

### THE MINISTER AND TRUTH.

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THE sneering question of the Roman governor, "What is truth?" may be asked in all seriousness, and it will be answered with difficulty. A distinction is sometimes made between fact and truth; the former term applying to things and incidents, the latter to relations. No such distinction is necessary to the purposes of this paper. By truth as here used is meant simply a statement which corresponds to reality, whatever that reality may be. With this definition in mind, let us see what effect the vital ideal in the ministry will have on the minister's relation to truth.

There are men whose sole object in life seems to be the pursuit and discovery of new and hitherto unknown truth. They toil as pioneers and discoverers on the borderland of the known, now and then making a successful incursion into the unknown, where they pick up some new fragment of fact, or, once in a great while, a boulder of truth. Their business is to explore and chart the newly discovered lands for subsequent travelers and settlers. To men who devote their time and energies to this kind of work we owe an inestimable debt of gratitude. They have labored in the midst of obloquy and opposition, without other reward than the consciousness of noble effort to discover truth. They have

given us most of our knowledge of the universe in which we live, and our power over the forces of nature. We cannot honor them too highly, nor can we render those who are now living more sympathy and aid than they deserve.

But the labors of these pioneer discoverers become valuable only when they or other men apply the results in a practical way to the various needs of men. The interest of the discoverer is primarily in the truth, that of the other man in men who are to be served by the truth.

Now the preacher belongs to the latter class. He is not indifferent to the discovery of truth, but that is not his business. His spiritual and intellectual eyes have been sufficiently opened for him to realize something of the dimness of the light that shines about him. He remembers that Paul, even with his great native ability and learning, his wonderful religious experience, and the illumination of inspiration, was yet compelled to write that we "know in part" only, and "now we see in a mirror, darkly." With the old Puritan divine, the minister believes that there is more light to break from God's Word: and not only from God's Word, but also from God's world. He feels sure there is a vast, indeed an infinite, field of undiscovered truth lying out before him. As the Greek philosopher, centuries ago, thought of himself as a boy playing on the seashore, and picking up a particularly beautiful shell now and then, while the great ocean of truth rolled before him unexplored; so the intelligent preacher knows there is a vast field of truth as yet unknown—in fact, that we know almost nothing of the heart and essence of things, that which we care most to know.

Moreover, he fears nothing that may be dragged out of that dim unknown, for he rests in the confident conviction that all that great unexplored region belongs to his God.

No genuine discovery is to be feared, but welcomed as a further and fuller revelation of the character and methods of his God. It is not truth that he fears, but error; not too much discovery, but too little. He rests assured that God made and rules over both the known and the unknown in love and power, and gave us the spiritual powers with which to trace out and follow his footsteps. It must, therefore, be not only allowable and appropriate, but, as he thinks, infinitely pleasing to God, for man to use those powers in the discovery of truth. He looks about him, and backward over the centuries, and notes the inestimable blessings which discoveries have brought to mankind. The physical universe has been in some measure conquered; unnecessary and unfounded fears, errors hoary with age and extremely hurtful to men, have been exploded and have vanished; life has been beautified and elevated. Judged from every standpoint, it seems to him, investigation is to be commended and encouraged.

This is the ideal attitude which, it would seem, ought to have characterized every minister, and indeed every Christian, throughout the centuries. But how different has been the actuality! Scarcely anything in the whole history of Christianity is more discouraging and disheartening than the incredulity and hostility with which the organized church has usually greeted the announcement of any great discovery. These discoveries have most frequently been made by devout Christian men, and can, therefore, be justly claimed as the legitimate fruit of the Christian life. For, in order to estimate Christianity fairly, it is necessary to distinguish between the individual Christian and the Christian organization, the church. As in other great corporate bodies, the church has not always been led by its best men. Christianity has better

succeeded in making individuals than in creating organizations. The flower and richest fruitage of our religion is seen in individual lives rather than in the visible corporate body as a whole. It should not, therefore, surprise us to find an individual Christian like Galileo murmuring that it does move as he turns away from the church court that had just compelled him to say that it did not move.

But whatever zeal for investigation, and hospitality to new truth, we may find in the individual Christian, the church has never been a discoverer, has rarely if ever encouraged investigation, and has often persecuted the man who dared with impious feet to step outside the beaten path of long-recognized and accepted truth. This has been true, even though it has sometimes canonized the daring discoverer centuries after his death.

In this attitude of hostility the controlling factor has been the clergy. They have almost uniformly looked with fear and suspicion on newly announced discoveries and in a solid phalanx fought the discoverer. This was especially true of the Middle Ages and the Roman Church, but other bodies have not escaped. And yet it would seem as if no other man would have so much reason to welcome new truth, so much desire to escape from old error. He above all other men, it would seem, would have confidence in truth, its value to men and its power to bless. With a proper and adequate faith in God he must also believe that all truth is of God, is necessarily consistent with all other truth, is a further revelation of God and of value to the welfare of man, temporal and eternal. He above others ought to know the hurtfulness of error, and the supreme value of facts. He more than others ought to realize that facts are the realities which come from God, while the theories and explanations, the systems, are

faltering fabrications of men, constantly liable to change and decay. He should know that a system is helpless before a fact; that one fact inconsistent with a theory is sufficient to effect the latter's modification or even complete overthrow. Such has not been the case. The spectacle of ministers holding to theories notwithstanding contradictory facts is ever before us. They refuse to recognize that

"Our little systems have their day;  
They have their day, and cease to be,  
But thou, O Lord, art more than they."

They have not been able to realize that there remained yet undiscovered truth lying outside their systems.

Whatever may have been true of the clergy of the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, such an attitude is certainly most unworthy of a Protestant minister in the twentieth century. He should at least have reached a point where he does not fear the light. He must have faith in truth, must not fear truth, must welcome new truth. To use an expression of the Master himself, when he had just uttered a mass of truth that was both new and frightfully radical to his hearers, he must be "like unto a man that is a householder, who bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old" (Matt. xiii. 52). Without fear, with perfect calmness and intense interest and sympathy, the minister should be able to sit before the refiner's fire, watch the test tube, peer through the telescope and the microscope, attend, welcome, encourage, all the experiments and efforts of the scientists. Why should he fear? He is convinced that

"In the dim unknown  
Standeth God within the shadows,  
Keeping watch above his own."

This confidence will give him calmness and poise in the

presence of opposing views and hostile criticism. Like all other thoughtful men, he has a world-view, that is, a set of assumptions from which he starts in all reasoning. They are not the result of a rational process, but rather the presuppositions of all reasoning. He knows they are but assumptions incapable of absolute proof; but he knows also that every other world-view rests on assumptions equally incapable of proof and equally necessary to the conclusions reached. His inner religious experience, his knowledge of the world, his study of the course of history, all seem to him to agree with and confirm the Christian view of God and the world, and he is confident that nothing will overthrow or even shake the fundamentals of that view. Judging from the past, he does not expect all men to accept his view; but that consideration in no wise alarms or disconcerts him. Secure in the conviction that his own view is fundamentally correct, and that profounder study and investigation will only lead men more and more to accept it, he demands for every man freedom of thought, the right of unhampered investigation. That does not mean that men of widely divergent and discordant views should remain in the same ecclesiastical organization, for a certain degree of harmony is necessary to all Christian, as to all other, work. Nor does it mean that variant views shall be immune from criticism and from attempt at refutation. It only means that every man shall have the right in society and the state to think for himself and to express his honest thoughts, that they shall not be suppressed by force but refuted by argument, and this it does mean with emphasis. This position he takes not only because of the fundamental rights of man, but also because he hopes for further discoveries by these fearless, independent thinkers. He remembers how the discoverers of the past have often

been execrated during their lives and canonized after death. He has no desire to play any part in the repetition of this sorrowful drama. He does not believe that all truth is known, and feels confident that every truth, new or old, has some power to bless and elevate man.

The wise and confident modern minister, then, encourages investigation and welcomes new truth. But he is not primarily an investigator. His mission in the world is not to discover but to use truth; that is, to apply it to the business of producing and growing life. Indeed, strange as it may at first sound, his interest is not primarily in truth at all, but only in truth as the minister to life. His mission is neither the discovery of truth nor the defense of truth, not even the propagation of truth for its own sake. He may do all these, as a minister, in fact and with propriety, and the last two functions he must perform. All this he does, however, not for its own sake, but in the interest of the main matter, which is the production and cultivation of life. He must never for one moment forget that he has been sent forth by his Lord to give life to men.

The fatal mistake of supposing that the main business of Christianity was to formulate, preserve, and defend the truth has not infrequently been made; but it can scarcely be doubted that the paramount interest of Jesus and his immediate disciples was in the life of men, not in any body of truth as such. He was the way and the truth, but only that he might culminate in the life. Not until he reached the life was his work complete. He judged men by their attitude to his Father and toward their fellow men, not by any body of truth they might be holding, except in so far as it might affect this attitude. To love God with one's whole being and

the neighbor as one's self, that was to fulfill the whole law and the prophets. Such was his thought.

But his free and vital attitude did not long continue in the infant church. Christianity quickly passed into the keeping of the Greeks. Their interest was in truth, speculative thought or philosophy, far more than in life or the welfare of the people. Ethics and religion, except as an æsthetic stimulus, had little value for the Greek. He was usually immoral himself, even when profoundly learned. It was doubtless natural that he should have speedily fastened his own intellectual attitude on the infant Christianity which had just passed into his custody. Gradually a man's intellectual beliefs came to be the standard by which he was judged. Theology established itself as the supreme, and in fact as almost the sole, criterion of the Christian life. A man must be orthodox or suffer the extreme penalties of ecclesiastical and civil displeasure. The kind of life he was living was a matter of secondary importance; he was tried by the truth he professed to hold. As we have seen, this was the reversal of the attitude of Jesus and the early churches, and its evil effects soon made themselves manifest. Persecution stalked on to the stage, sectarianism and bitterness rent the church, moral standards rapidly sank, and Christian life became little better than that of the heathen about it.

The truth was formulated into Creeds as a sacred deposit, infallible, unchangeable, universally valid and binding. In this form it was regarded as final and absolute truth, to be permanently preserved from all enemies and mercilessly turned against all foes. Subscribe to these formulas, and all was well; depart from them, and the flames of earth and of an eternal hell were the penalty. Thus it was almost universally throughout the Middle Ages, and still is in the

Roman and Greek Catholic churches. In fact it is, to the present hour, the most characteristic thing about these two great churches. They claim above all else to be *orthodox*, that is, correct in teaching. They have *the truth*, securely packed in creeds and labeled, easily found and always ready for deadly use against men, against life. No other Christian body has laid so much emphasis upon *truth*, no other has made such shipwreck in the production of *life*. Their great mistake has been that they placed truth in the room of life as the object of thought and endeavor, with the woeful result that they have largely made failure of both truth and life. In no other bodies are there such ruinous masses of superstitious and hurtful error, and in no other is the standard of Christian living so low. This condition is no accident, but is the direct and immediate result of the mistake of putting truth in the supreme place given by Jesus to life.

The true minister will, therefore, shun this great and specious danger as he would the blight. On the other hand, he will not make the equally fatal mistake of being indifferent to truth, of believing that one belief is as good as another. No; he knows that no error can be as valuable for life as truth. Truth is the food of the soul, the life, and as such is of supreme importance to every man who would nobly serve the life. As it is the business of the minister to serve the life, he must know, and know how to use, the truth. Just as the world to-day has the most intense and practical interest in the purity, value, and effects of the various kinds of foods in the building and sustaining of the body, so the preacher cannot fail to be interested in the food of the soul. Sanitation, nourishment, and exercise are as necessary to spiritual health, growth, and strength as to the welfare of the body. Providing these conditions of vigorous growth is the

minister's work, and he cannot, therefore, be indifferent to the soul's food, if he be a worthy man. He will seek the truth, winnow out the error, be satisfied with nothing but the truth to give to his people. He may be responsible to some ecclesiastical organization for the presentation of a certain type of theology and ecclesiastical opinion, but he is responsible to God and the souls of men for the presentation of the truth and nothing but the truth, the pure, unadulterated food of the soul. It is a solemn responsibility which cannot be lightly assumed by any man who seriously considers his duty. Reflection on these facts should make the minister a most diligent truth-seeker—a seeker after the truth, in order that he may be a minister of the truth to the life of men.

The preacher's interest in truth is pragmatic, he cherishes it for its value to life. This leads him to make sharp distinctions among truths, so as to be able to put them to use according to their respective values. He has been called of God and men mainly to cherish the moral and religious elements of man's nature. Society has provided the school to care for the intellectual development of the race, and the means of ministration to the physical man are numberless. There is comparatively little that the preacher needs to do or can do here, other than generate an atmosphere of divine and human love that will demand justice and kindness in all social and economic relations. He cannot of course be indifferent to men's physical welfare. That is a part of the specific task to whose constant solution he has been called. But he must reach and contribute his share to that solution in the way which is appropriate to his own place and calling, that is through the infusion of life and vigor into the man's spiritual nature. He is working toward an ideal, not on a

program. It is granted to him to contribute powerfully to the making of men with right purposes and the ability to carry them into effect; statesmen and economists must carry through the program. This practical work is in modern times done mainly through the state and municipality. The modern preacher is thus left free from principal responsibility for the training of the mind and the care of the body, except as he creates an atmosphere friendly to these tasks. But over against this he should realize that he is charged with almost exclusive responsibility for the care of the moral and religious nature. This is due to the exclusion of moral and religious instruction from the state schools in America, and to the growing disposition to neglect this instruction in the home. The church and the Sunday school, led by the preacher, are thereby assuming an importance in the religious life of Americans that they perhaps never had before.

In meeting this grave responsibility the minister will choose those truths for presentation which best serve the purposes and ends of his calling. It is his duty and privilege to bring men to know God and feed their lives from this eternal source of all life. He will avoid the trivial, the unimportant, the ephemeral, however true they may be, and drive straight at the heart of the eternally important. The affairs of the kingdom of God and the life eternal are of such transcendent importance and his opportunities for addressing men on these themes are so infrequent and brief that no time should be lost on the unimportant. Judged from this standpoint, and it is undoubtedly the correct one, how much irrelevant matter is sometimes presented in the modern pulpit! What value, for example, have curious questions of literary criticism for the temporal or eternal welfare of the average man? So with most of the critical

opinions which some dapper young theologues, and a few older preachers whose age has not increased their wisdom, feel compelled to air on occasion. Brilliant and startling attacks on long and widely cherished views may call forth an ephemeral newspaper notoriety, and even provoke a heresy trial, but they will never save a soul or build up the life of a man. If ministers kept constantly before them the supreme object of their high calling, the production of life, and really cared for this unique privilege, we should be spared such dazzling spectacles. Negations sometimes clear the ground for the building of life, but they make no direct contribution thereto. Nature hates an intellectual or spiritual vacuum as much as a physical one, and usually destroys it or penalizes its presence.

Equally futile and barren is the defense or advocacy of views that have no vital significance to either preacher or hearers, on the ground that they are old and orthodox. They may even be true, and may have filled an important place in the life of men in the past, when conditions were different; but if conditions have so changed as to render them relatively useless for the life of men now, the wise preacher will omit them. He is to build the life and must choose his message to that end. It is not established views of Scripture or subscription to creeds that give life to the soul, but knowledge of God in Christ Jesus, brought home to the hearts of men by the passionate earnestness of the preacher, fired by a heart conviction. Such truth gives life. Official ecclesiastical orthodoxy may be just as barren of the fruits of the Spirit and the graces of the Christian life as the most radical liberalism. To see that this is historically true one needs only to turn his eyes to the Orthodox Church of the East, or to those periods in the history of any of the modern

churches when most emphasis was laid on orthodoxy. They are never the periods of greatest harmony, holiness, and activity. The periods of vital preaching are the periods of Christian power.

Thoughts of other things are constantly thrust on men by the exigencies of their daily lives, while there is little to recall them to God. They have little time to learn to know God and themselves, sin and the Saviour, this world with its duties and the eternity that lies beyond. It must also be admitted that most men have all too little inclination to reflect on these things. These are, therefore, the thoughts, meditations, and aspirations that ought to speak especially from the pulpit. Silence would be better than the barren, blatant, negative criticism, or the dry, dreary, droning polemics that are sometimes heard there. If the preacher would only remember that his mission is to life, such subjects would not be treated in the pulpit. They have their place, no doubt. Let the preacher do his share in the world's intellectual battles, for such battles must be fought, no doubt. But in the pulpit we want food, not powder and ball, no matter which direction the gun is pointed. In the pulpit let us seek to build up life, not to kill and destroy, and let us select our truths accordingly. Not truth for truth's sake, but truth for life's sake; not all truth, but relevant truth; not official truth, but vital truth, of highest worth to the life of men — this is the truth which the minister who is furnished to every good word and work will discover and present.