

THE CHRISTIAN VIEW OF THE UNIVERSE

Notes of an Address given at the Conference of Research Scientists by

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1. *The Christian should have a distinctive view of the universe.*

MANY EVANGELICALS DO NOT realize the extent to which Biblical doctrine demands that the Christian shall have a distinctive view of the world, i.e. a view which is controlled by certain general principles. Some have fallen short through a spirit of fear, a fear that science and philosophy would somehow prove too strong for them. Others have erred by mistakenly confining their interest to the spiritual and regarding material things as beneath the Christian's true interest.

2. *Why should a Christian have a distinctive view?*

(i) It is dishonouring to God to avoid the issue. It is actually irreverent to refuse to see and to hold all things in the light of God's work as Creator. God is not only God the Saviour, He is also *God the Creator* and to neglect this second aspect of his work is to be false to our Protestant heritage.

(ii) A distinct view of creation is plainly taught in the Scriptures whose authority we elsewhere acknowledge.

(iii) To avoid the issue most often results in a false dualism in the Christian's life, where he will in practice keep his views concerning cosmology and also his day-to-day professional life in one compartment, and his Sunday religion in another. Finally a superficial experience rather than objective truth tends to become the basis of his faith. Such a process is destructive of true belief.

Schleiermacher's and Ritschl's unnecessary and specious distinction between 'judgments of fact' and 'judgments of value' by which it was hoped to turn the edge of the scientific opposition, exposes the other flank of Christianity to the attacks of modern psychology. The ultimate grounds of faith must always remain the historicity of the facts on which the Faith is founded. Nothing is gained in Christianity by deprecating or abandoning the objective and the historical in the supposed interest of 'spiritual values.'

3. *What are the sources of the Christian view?*

There are two sources:

(i) God's revelation.

(ii) Observation and reason.

Of these, of course, revelation must be firmly held to be primary and fundamental. Through revelation, received by faith, we see God's creatorship (Heb. xi, 3). But we must not therefore undervalue the data received through observation and the use of reason.

In Romans i and ii (e.g. i, 19-20) Paul clearly teaches that men are without excuse for failing to recognize the Creator's eternal power and Godhead from the things which He made. There is a similar passage in Acts xiv, 15-27. The plain meaning of St. Paul's words is, surely, that there is sufficient evidence in the universe to bring us a knowledge of God's power and also to lead us to see our own weakness.

4. *How are the two sources of knowledge related?*

Some err by placing them in frank opposition. Others proceed by a process of suppressing the one in favour of the other. For example, Thomas Aquinas in the Mediaeval Synthesis makes reason and observation primary, and commencing with reason he supplements his essentially rationalistic system by the use of revelation. But we must follow closely the Biblical approach, which is that to a man who has by faith received the primary light of revelation, observation and reason are then invaluable. To receive revelation (if it is what it claims to be) is an eminently reasonable act. Faith is informed by God's wisdom. Because of sin and the fall, we must start with God's revelation and accept it wholeheartedly. But having done so, we are under duty to apply our powers of observation and of reason to the full.

5. *What are the characteristics of the Christian view?*

When we have defined the sources of our information, how should the essentials of

our Christian view be formulated? Christians must unhesitatingly recognize that their outlook is controlled by their Christian doctrine. (If any scientist ventures to complain that this is arguing in a circle he must tactfully be reminded that the whole of his method of thought is dominated by his arbitrary starting point and rigid applications of certain assumptions which are incapable of proof.) It is important, however, to note that the Bible principles exercise a general control and not a control in detail. Certain great doctrines which are unequivocally declared in Scripture are always in the background of the Christian's thought life. They cannot and must not be ignored. But in matters of detail we must always be careful not to make deductions and applications beyond the evidence. We must pursue the truth with deep humility of mind, remembering that wiser men than ourselves have misinterpreted both the Bible on the one hand, and the Book of Nature on the other. The Christian's mind is controlled by the plain affirmations of Scripture:

(i) That God created the universe. There is a great cleavage between the theist and all atheists and agnostics. He approaches his world view with God and not the phenomena as the starting point. Those who are not theists avoid this question.

(ii) That the theory of evolution as ordinarily held and taught is in direct contradiction to his basic outlook. The Christian can appreciate that there has been modification of original forms, but he is quite unable to come to terms with anything in the nature of the atheistic theory of spontaneous generation.

(iii) That man is a special creation of God. The Bible, again, does not permit us to compromise on this point. The whole doctrine of sin, and also of redemption is imperilled if the doctrine of man's origin be abandoned.

(iv) That creation illustrates the glory of God, e.g. see the Psalms. Of all men the Christian should rejoice in this fact. But few appear sufficiently to realize and to act on it.

(v) That creation has been radically affected by the fall and human depravity. Not only has the destructive effect of sin fallen upon the animal world, but it is

possible that evil in other forms may account for certain other phenomena (Gn. iii; Rom. viii; 2 Pet. iii).

(vi) That God not only created but also sustains the universe. (Heb. i, 3 and Col. i, 17 admit of no form of deism, i.e. that God created and then left the world largely to run itself.) His relation to the world is vitalistic not mechanistic, and the Bible emphasizes His personal interest and control.

(vii) That God, as well as being present in the world, is in essence outside of and separate from the world which He has made. This view is in contrast to that of the pantheists who virtually identify God with the world.

(viii) That God, while normally appearing to work through 'second causes,' is not at all limited to these and can, and sometimes does, intervene when and where He wills. Christianity, unlike science, is not a closed system.

6. *What is the effect of this Christian view on scientific research?*

The effect is general rather than particular. It is chiefly seen in practical consequences for the research workers themselves. The trouble with man who sins is not that his faculties are wrong but the man himself is wrong. If properly directed, the faculties can still perform the services for which they were intended. But they can also be wrongly directed. They are often put to serve the wrong master, St. Paul makes this very clear in Romans vi, 19. There is nothing wrong with the faculties themselves (except in so far as man's physical well-being deteriorates under sin and disease). The new birth does not provide a new apparatus; it puts the man himself right and directs his faculties into new channels.

7. *What deductions should we make from these considerations?*

(i) The Christian has no need whatever to fear the fullest and most accurate scientific investigation.

(ii) He should rather be encouraged to study and investigate God's creation so that God's glory may be enhanced in his own thought-life and that of others.

(iii) All such considerations should produce humility. The Christian is a man who is compelled to be humble if he

understands rightly either revelation or research.

(iv) The Christian must be more ruthlessly accurate, more realistic and more concerned for the ultimate truth than others. It is a shame that so much slipshod work has appeared. We have allowed the world to get the idea that the modern scientists are the only ones who are dispassionately devoted to the search for the truth. But we know that scientists are often among the most proud, arrogant and prejudiced of men. Frequently they are held back from the truth in their thought-life by a prior scientific assumption.

(v) The Christian's actual observation and tabulation of the facts will be the same as that of others, and here we must emphasize that a Christian must record the *whole* of the facts. But the interpretations and often the deductions from the facts will inevitably be different particularly in relation to the larger aspects of any subject. The total picture is determined by the radical principles discussed above.

(vi) When it comes to theorizing and

philosophizing, then of necessity there is a difference in the Christian's approach. He cannot help having his theories and explanations affected by his faith. (It is a moot point whether science should have left its strict place of observing and recording and ventured to stray into philosophy.) It is very plain that modern science is full of theory, much of which is unsupported by proof. The Christian must here play the rôle of realist in insisting upon facts and upon more careful deductions. If he rightly understands this faith he, more than anyone, is in a position to be the greatest realist and the most disinterested of research workers.

Finally, it must again be reiterated that it is only in the major principles, where Holy Scripture speaks with crystal clarity, that the Christian concerned should introduce and emphasize the knowledge derived from revelation. In ordinary research he must be the patient, humble, and intensely realistic collector of the data of empirical science. But in cleaving to his Biblical principles he is acting in strict loyalty to the truth in that he has been provided by God, who is the Truth, with certain necessary clues.

EVANGELISM AND ORGANIZED RELIGION

Shall my witness for Christ be within the framework of the organized Church, or shall I strike out on my own, joining a local fellowship, or starting something new? Here are two answers to this familiar question. What do you think about it?

I. Can Churchless Witness Succeed?

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THIS IS A DANGEROUS title. It is likely to foster a very prevalent fallacy if, as is natural, one presumes that the substantive is more important than the adjective. Witness! Poor, hard-worked word! To many it is the be-all and end-all of Christianity. But the Westminster catechism puts us right when it begins with the reminder that the chief end of man is not to witness but to glorify God. Worship comes before witness. How much worship

can there be in churchless witness? The Apostles were ordained by Christ first that they should be with Him, and only secondly that they should be sent forth.¹

It would be very hard for anyone who claimed to be a follower of Jesus to defend witness on a non-church membership basis, for He Himself retained His membership of the Jewish church till the end. To repudiate the church as corrupt and renounce His membership would have been a simple and natural step to take. Yet His attitude in the incident of the man with the withered hand² and during His trial before the Sanhedrin³ shows that this was a course which He

¹ Mk. iii, 14; ² Mk. iii, 1-7; ³ Mk. xiv, 55-64.