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THE  
CHURCHMAN

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AUGUST, 1905.

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THE PLACE OF DOGMA IN RELIGION.

OURS is a time when every doctrine of the faith is being re-discussed and re-examined. And this is partly, perhaps, a consequence, not to be blamed, of our new methods of philosophy and new tests of truth. A great deal that weighed with our ancestors does not now seem to be *ad rem*. We are more surprised than edified by much that passed for sound reason with the Fathers, with the Reformers, with the great scholars of the next age. And it is, indeed, evidence of the faith that it continues to commend itself to the keenest intellects trained in the new methods as powerfully as to men whose reasons were disciplined in a very different school.

But it must be confessed that another cause is responsible for much of this restless questioning of each Christian doctrine in turn, for much of the light-headed willingness to surrender now the Virgin Birth, presently the Resurrection, and in turn everything that happened between the two. This cause is aversion to dogma as dogma, and to individual dogmas merely as specimens of an unloved species. Dogmatic teaching as such is unpopular. It is widely held and loudly taught that only the emotional side of religion need interest us much. Emotion and dogma are spoken of as if they were in opposition—not, perhaps, enemies, but rivals at least—bidding against each other for our favour.

And in this rivalry there can be no doubt about the popular verdict. Dogma, logical, exact, austere, beckons us into a schoolroom and calls for our best attention. But some of us are not in the habit of giving our best attention to anything—to religion perhaps least of all. Emotion invites us into a conservatory, warm and odorous, to experience the luxury of feelings which claim to be the essential part of religion, although in reality they belong also to poetry, music, and romance. People are very willing indeed to content them-

selves with soft and gentle thrills, as far removed from earnest study as from faithful service.

Why need we trouble ourselves about the doctrine of the Incarnation, as long as we can admire the lovely and blameless life of Jesus? Why concern ourselves about the Atonement, if pity and a vague sense of personal obligation and gratitude are kindled to a genial warmth by the story of the Passion? It has come to be said at last, What matter about the actual truth of the narratives? Read them as if they were true; let them soothe the emotions even if they cannot penetrate the convictions. The soul is bidden, instead of a living Saviour and Brother, to content itself with the embrace of this pale and pulseless ghost of a creed, with no flesh and blood, not to speak of bone and sinew.

It is, therefore, a most grave and practical question: What is the place of dogma in my religion, and what is its importance? But first let us have a clear and distinct view of the meaning of what we are discussing. What is dogma? The first meaning of the word was what one sees, and next, one's opinion of what he sees, his theory of it, his inferences, so that it answered with curious exactness to our English expression, a man's "*views*." But gradually it has come to mean a great deal more—not one's views, but his firmest convictions, his certainties, accurately propounded and put into a logical and formal statement. Such a statement of any truth is really a dogma—gravitation just as much as the resurrection of the dead. Theology has its dogmas, and these are unpopular; but so has chemistry, so has astronomy. Dogma resembles faith in this respect—that it plays a great part in religion simply because it plays a great part everywhere. Men are so made that it is impossible for them to take a real interest in anything whatever, or to advance far in any study, without constructing a whole chain of dogmas upon the subject. Even history is not content to relate her charming tales; she propounds a science, a philosophy of history, with many strange dogmas, some of which, like some of her tales, are true.

The tendency to dogmatize may easily go too far. One may be over-hasty in laying down the law, over-positive in treating guesswork as knowledge, over-hot in resenting incredulity; and if this man is a theologian, people say, rightly enough, that he is too dogmatic. But why this complaint should be kept for theologians only is what I never could understand. The late Mr. Huxley was a self-confident and rash dogmatist, though he was no lover of what is known as dogma; and Mr. Herbert Spencer, while he thought himself to be refuting all dogma, was weaving large tissues of

that very fabric, of which a great part has vanished like a mist. But though it is possible to dogmatize overmuch, the rightful making of dogma is always going on. Without it no science could exist. For a dogma is simply a formulated and careful pronouncement concerning truth supposed to be made out and settled.

Shall we say, then, that in the field of religion there are no such dogmas? Or that, if there are, we have not the faculties to discover them?

But this is a dogma, a dogma in the field of religion, a most hazardous and sweeping dogma, not to be accepted without far more proof than it has ever yet produced. It is the more audacious, because the religion which it contradicts is rooted in historic fact: it gathers around the life and death of Christ and what followed upon this; and it exhibits direct evidence far stronger than any other event in ancient history can show. It is no mere group of edifying sentiments or precepts—not at all: Christ was either a mere man, or else He was Miracle Incarnate; His death was either a sacrifice for sin, or else it was the greatest of all crimes. And you cannot read the story without asking questions which demand definite answers; dogma is quite inevitable.

The doctrine of the Trinity is not formally expressed in Scripture, just as gravitation is not openly revealed in nature; both of these are inferences drawn by human reason from what is revealed to it. Nay, they are revelations also; but revelations made to the reflective intellect, not to the organs of observation.

We read that "the Father showeth the Son all things that He doeth; that whatsoever the Son seeth the Father doing" (which is "all things") "He doeth also and in like manner"; and that all men are bound to honour Him as they honour the Father.

Is it possible to read these things and not to ask, Is He, then, inferior to the Father? And, if He is not inferior, are there two Gods, and is polytheism come back to us? Or is He, as the Church believes, a partaker in the Divine nature, which is one? And is it therefore that He calls Himself "the Son," and "the only-begotten Son," and the "one Son, the beloved"?

You may answer "Yes," or you may answer "No," but one is as dogmatic as the other. For, I repeat, there is no greater mistake than to think that you get rid of dogma by getting rid of the Creeds. In vain you strive to dismiss it otherwise than by refusing to think at all, by the carelessness which drifts on to its fate, across unexplored waters, without a compass or a chart.

Well, but does it very greatly matter which answer I give to these questionings of my soul? Is it right to attach so much importance to my belief? Must I lose everything by making a mistake upon such subjects? Surely what concerns me is to feel tenderly and affectionately about Jesus the Good Shepherd, and to try to follow His example. Other speculations may interest theologians, but can they shipwreck an immortal soul?

Now, let us be quite frank. I am sure that no mere error in judgment, of itself, apart from the moral state which may have led up to it—carelessness or rash presumption, or disobedient reluctance to be taught—can forfeit one's eternity. It must be true of beliefs, as of conduct, that the servant who knew not his master's will and did it not shall be beaten with few stripes, which does not mean endless perdition. But yet he shall be beaten; for all our beliefs have consequences, as practical as follow those of a farmer concerning the rotation of crops. Just as a flower which is not killed is yet checked and stunted by a sharp air and a thin soil, and revives and flourishes when transplanted; just as a recruit, pale from the slums of a crowded city, is developed by exercise, his lungs expand and his limbs grow sinewy, so is the soul degraded by all unworthy conceptions of God and His grace, and, again, drawn out and developed by every fine and pure truth concerning Him in whom we live and move and have our being.

Unkind thoughts of Him will make myself unkind. Unworthy conceptions will make me content to return an unworthy love. If I contract the efficacy of His love to the scope of any conventicle whatever—call it a meeting-house, call it a cathedral—I shall not do adequate homage to that great heart which, by the grace of God, tasted death for every man.

Further, it is only through solid and trustworthy fact, pondered and accepted, that the very feelings which men put into contrast with dogma can be fed. And as we saw that dogma is not confined to religion, so the connection between dogma and emotion is visible all around us. Perhaps the emotion which comes nearest to distinctly religious feeling is excited by the midnight sky, with its golden lamps rising, setting, all night long. Nay, it is, or may be, religious. When I consider the heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which Thou hast ordained—what is man, that Thou art mindful of him?

Well, to-night we find there an appeal to us, of which the Psalmist never dreamed. We reflect that the light in our eyes started from yonder star before the Pyramids were builded; and if the star were destroyed ten thousand years

ago, not we, but our remote posterity, should watch it burning out, as stars have done, as men have watched them doing. Our imagination reels under the strain. But remember, as your heart beats high, to think of vaster systems than David guessed, blazing suns with worlds around them rushing, as we are rushing, faster than a cannon-ball can fly, through abysmal spaces evermore—remember that geometry and mathematics, hard and long studies of centuries of scholars, all the dogmas—for dogmas they are—of the severe science of astronomy, were in that thrill you felt as you gazed into the midnight sky.

Why, then, are you surprised, when we tell you that the pure emotion of the young heart, singing :

“Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,  
Look upon a little child,”

can, as time goes on, be deepened and intensified by learning that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself?

As with nature, so with art. You are amazed, in looking on some vast cathedral, at its dignified, harmonious grandeur. But some competent person shows you how all this was, in a sense, forced upon the builders—assuming their competence to learn—how the stone roof would either have crushed the walls or burst them out without this ponderous masonry; how its bulk would have been clumsy if some of it had not passed out from the walls into buttresses; how these were planned, not for the charm of light and shade which they possess, but to lean against the walls and steady them; how at last was invented the exquisite flying buttress, standing away from the building altogether, but stretching an arch cross-like, an arm to sustain it; how this might prove too slight to resist the outward thrust, if its weight were not increased by the lovely pinnacle which crowns it, so that the whole building is fitly joined together and compacted. Surely your admiration, your wonder, is increased by all you learn. But if you were so foolish as to say, “I am content with my superficial first impressions;—like Wordsworth,

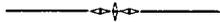
‘Contented if “I” might enjoy  
The things that others understand’—

do not trouble me with reasons and calculations,” then the man who knows would answer: “Those old builders knew not enough, though they knew something of what you esteem so lightly; the principles of building had not yet been worked out into dogma. They built, as you would do, for beauty and emotion, without sound and full calculation, and therefore many ambitions and costly cathedrals tumbled almost at once about the builders’ ears. We have only those which survive.

We owe their existence, and the emotions they excite, entirely to their conformity with dogmatic architectural law."

Well, religion is a solid thing, meant to regulate and govern us. We are God's building. Can you seriously expect permanent results by merely exciting the feelings, as a sighing wind does, or the sound of distant music? Can you not see that if God condescends to explain anything of His relations to the soul, any of the reasons why the Saviour died, anything of our standing by nature or in grace, it must be that He expects thus to quicken our penitence and faith, our loyalty and love, to give us peace and joy in believing, to make those very feelings which are foolishly opposed to knowledge blossom like the rose, nourished with sap and substance through a solid stem, the roots of which are wrapped around the Rock of Ages.

G. A. DERRY AND RAPHOE.



#### CHURCH WORK IN SOUTH AFRICA.

I SHALL only try in this paper to set down a few impressions of South Africa as a mission-field gathered from a short experience in the colony last summer as a member of the Mission of Help. I shall therefore leave out all reference to the history of the South African Church, with perhaps one brief exception, and limit myself entirely to things as they are.

The long railway journey from Cape Town to Pretoria, a distance of some thousand miles travelled at the dignified pace of twenty miles an hour, gives one time to take in something of the immensity of the country, and to gauge the hugeness of the task that lies before us in the making of South Africa. An occasional commercial traveller will drop into your carriage at some wayside station and give you *his* ideas. "The Jews are the only people who get on here," he will tell you, and point you to iron-roofed stores run by Hebrews close by the line here and there as we pass along. "The Jews and the Germans," he will add presently. "And what about the natives?" we ask, thinking sympathetically, perhaps, of those to whom the land seems rightly to belong. "Oh, the native! he's too lazy—too lazy even to pluck his own fruit. He likes to rest under his vine and wait till the grapes ripen and fall into his mouth!" And so we live and learn as we go along.

After fifty and a half hours of travel we reach Pretoria feeling at once the stir of those sad warring days in which