

The Necessity of Dogma.

“**H**E that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the Churches” (Rev. ii. 7). It will be obvious that I am proposing to make an unusual application of these familiar words. They are generally claimed by those who may, without prejudice, be described as modernists, and sometimes by those more than modernists, those futurist sons of the morning, who, in their conviction that the night is far spent and that the day is at hand, would cast off the works of dogma, and put on, a little breathlessly, the armour of enlightenment. They are not, I think, very commonly employed to indicate the necessity of maintaining the Catholic and Apostolic Faith.

But it is part of my purpose, both now and always, to claim that liberty and Christianity are identical, that the freedom of man and the Gospel of Christ are the same thing. We pray every morning to Him Whose service is perfect freedom, and St. John reminds us that our Lord said, “Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” We attain our full stature, our perfect liberty, we become what God means us to be, only when we hear and comprehend and assimilate the truth of God.

And in order to assimilate as much as may be of the whole truth of God, we must listen not only with our own ears, but with the ears of our fathers. “O Lord, we have heard with our ears, and our fathers have declared unto us, the noble works that Thou didst in their days, and in the old time before them.” Those Christians who happen at this moment, or at any moment, to be what we call alive, are only a very small part of the whole Church. We may not disfranchise the departed, and refuse to hear their evidence, simply because their experience and the record of it is earlier in date than ours. If dogma is founded upon facts, let it be founded on all the facts. If we are going to “hear the Church,” let us hear the whole Church.

For what is dogma? It is the experience, digested, recorded, classified, of Christendom. It is the result of the impression made by our Lord upon His servants. It is what the friends of Christ have thought about Him.

I.

There are three things that I desire to say. And the first is this. *Christian dogma is a fact, a phenomenon, that we must take into consideration.*

The great miracle of history is that Jesus, the Nazarene, has been able to project Himself forward into the world's life. His effect on human character has included the lives of persons of every imaginable kind: men and women, young and old, wise and foolish, ambassadors and children, kings and mothers, the lusty soldier and the crippled girl; a Paul, a Mary Magdalene, a Joan of Arc, a Thomas More, a Wesley, a Dr. Johnson, a Father Stanton. He has led to the production of writings so different as the Gospel of St. Luke and the *Summa Theologiæ* of St. Thomas Aquinas, the *Imitation* and the *Pilgrim's Progress*, the *Great Charter*, and the *Book of Common Prayer*. And all this has been born of the conviction that "Jesus is Lord." There are many things that might be said about the weakness and sinfulness of the Church of Christ, and if any reader is thinking of some of those things now, let him believe that I would join with him in acts of penitence. But it remains a great miracle—the greater as we know more truly the frailty of the material it has had to work upon—that the organ of divine salvation, which began when God did not abhor the Virgin's womb, is still surviving. The Christian religion has apparently been destroyed time after time by the ingenuity of its opponents and by the badness of its friends, but it is still here to-day. "One Jesus, Whom Paul affirmed to be alive." Yes, and He is still alive, because a young man, Onesimus, or Francis of Assisi, or William Smith, has just been converted by His grace.

II.

This dogma was an inevitable fact. You may regret it. You may wish that what you think is the simplicity of the Sermon on the Mount had never been encumbered by the metaphysics of the Nicene Creed. For my own part, I do not for a single moment agree that the Sermon on the Mount is simple in the sense of being non-theological, or that our Lord's Gospel can ever be separated from a true belief about His right to speak it. But so far as metaphysics are concerned, as a plain person to whom metaphysics are always rather difficult, I will agree that it would have been nicer

(I use a foolish word on purpose) if the amount of metaphysics could have been smaller. But it was impossible. The early Christians were entirely convinced of the fact, which is entirely true, that in religion you must use the whole of the faculties that God has given you, intellect and all. Religion is to some extent connected with the feelings, and to a much larger extent connected with the will. But the only complete description of religion is that it is an affair of the entire personality.

Remember what happened. The Church began, as you can read in the twelfth chapter of 1 Corinthians, verse 3, with the simple confession that "Jesus is Lord." Then came the heretics. A few of them were perhaps seekers after notoriety. A few of them were men of evil life. But the great majority of them were simply questioners, men who had hold—an exaggerated hold—on some one side of a Christian doctrine, and wanted to know whether room could be found in Christianity for the thing that they felt to be important. And the Church had to find an answer to their questions. The Church had to dig down deep into the wisdom of the Bible and the treasury of its own experience of Christ to find the answer. So came the Creeds.

It was not in the least that the Church was possessed with a lust for making definitions. The Creeds are defensive in their origin. For example, a man named Arius arose, and said that our Lord was only to be called divine in some sense inferior to that in which the Father is divine. St. Athanasius at once perceived that the whole doctrine of Redemption was at stake. For a being who is less than Very God of Very God may teach and lead and help. He may bring a message down from Heaven. *But he cannot bring divine Redemption, he cannot recreate humanity.* So Athanasius fought for the true faith, and so the famous Creed of the Council of Nicæa was made as a bulwark of the Gospel. But the thing for which Athanasius fought was not his own idea. It was not simply the private opinion of a clever man. It was the charter of Redemption for our children's children. The simple Christian of to-day, who trusts in Jesus only for salvation, owes it indeed to Jesus only that he has means of grace or hope of Heaven, but he owes it to Athanasius and those like Athanasius that the faith of Jesus has been preserved until to-day.

Or take that other Confession of our Christian Faith, which is

commonly called the Creed of St. Athanasius, though it has much more connection with St. Augustine and the Latin-speaking Church. You perhaps do not like it. It would help a little if you realized that Morning Prayer, the service in which it occurs on thirteen occasions in the year, was never intended to be the general public service of Sunday morning, to which all manner of worshippers, instructed and uninstructed alike, should come. But it would help still more if you realized, as perhaps indeed you do, the meaning and history of the document, how every sentence of it is the actual answer to some question that actually was asked, how it bears from end to end the dints of actual conflict, how it has as a matter of historic fact preserved the faith.

The Church cannot undo the work of the great Creed-making centuries, the fourth and fifth, any more than it can undo the Reformation, any more than Europe can deny the French Revolution, or any other organization can deny an event which has left a permanent mark upon its life. It is not only that I *ought* not as a Christian to abandon Christian dogma any more than a soldier ought to lay down his rifle. It is that as a Christian I *can* no more abandon Christian dogma than I can shake off my arms and legs.

The Church can re-interpret? Yes, of course it can. Just as Athanasius re-interpreted the faith expressed in the New Testament and loosely current in the Church of his day, so we must re-interpret the ancient Creed of Christendom and express it to the men of our own day in language that they can understand. But always we begin with what the Spirit has said to the Church. The Historic Faith lays down the lines along which our Christian thinking will go. We hold it modestly and humbly. We know that it is not—that no human language ever can be—more than an approximation to the whole truth of God. Of course all theological language is of a metaphorical character. No one supposes that "Personality" or "Fatherhood," or any other such term, has no more meaning, no fuller and richer meaning, in the divine sphere than that with which we are familiar in the human sphere. But the human language is a sufficient approximation to the truth. No one supposes that when you have said, with Christian theologians, that there are in Christ two Natures in One Person, you have exhausted the whole of what our Lord knows about Himself. But it is enough—

and it is vital for our Christianity—to know that He is Very God and Very Man.

III.

My last point is this. *Christian dogma is the analysis of Christianity, a formula which Christian men will find it easy to remember, by which Christian men will live.*

Our religion is not a religion of mere aspiration. It does not consist simply of saying "Lift up your hearts," or "There is a good time coming," or "Perhaps after all it will be all right." It is a Gospel. It is *News* of something that God did. The "faithful saying" is that "Christ Jesus *came* into the world to save sinners."

St. Paul, when he was casting about for a formula which would exclude idolatry and the infection of belief in evil spirits, had no difficulty in finding what he wanted. "No man can say that Jesus is Lord, but in the Holy Ghost." Only in the atmosphere of that Holy Source of all Christian life can you take the sacred formula upon your lips.

St. Athanasius, when confronted by a heresy which, as Mr. Balfour has pointed out in an eloquent passage of his *Foundations of Belief*, would have inflicted irremediable impoverishment upon the Christian Faith, fought strenuously and victoriously for the formula which you find in the Nicene Creed, "Very God of Very God, Of one substance with the Father, By Whom all things were made." Without that, there is no Redemption.

We in our day are confronted by a double fact. On the one hand we find people who think they can be Christians without anything to stand on. Of course they are parasites; they are really living on the Creed of Christendom. But what they *say* is that their religion consists in going about and doing good. God forbid that I should impugn the reality of their goodness. It is the most difficult problem with which I am acquainted that a few strong souls appear to win through life without the Christian Creed. But I have not the least hesitation in saying that for very many it is only a fine weather faith, which will not help them to face the real Cross when the real Cross comes.

And on the other hand we find people, especially poor people, who are the vast majority of the population of Great Britain, who in nearly all the affairs of life are accustomed to live by formulas.

“Mustn’t grumble” is the dogma of the poor. Magnificently patient, but theologically quite inadequate.

What the Church has to do is to teach a few—a very few—of *the right formulas*, to make Christian dogmas what they are meant to be, the saving knowledge of the simple man. Religious education ought not to consist, as it too often does, of imparting historical and geographical information, of instruction in the dimensions of the Temple or of the distinctive tenets of the Pharisees and Sadducees. It consists of a few Christian dogmas, “Jesus is Very God of Very God,” “I believe in the Holy Ghost,” “Every parishioner shall communicate at the least three times a year, of which Easter to be one,” “Ye shall bring this child to the Bishop to be confirmed by him,” “The things which a Christian ought to know and believe to his soul’s health.”

We are thinking of Reconstruction, and the Church of England is preparing for a National Mission. The fundamental success of such a Mission depends of course on its effects on character. But if the Church is going to reach the people, if it is going to begin to have the desired effect on character, it must deal more largely in simple Christian formulas—the old formulas, or new ones which mean the same thing—which men can learn, and remember, and use as they go about their work.

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