

THE EXPRESSION OF DOCTRINE IN TERMS OF THE NEW AGE.

BY THE REV. W. H. RIGG, D.D., Vicar of Beverley Minster.

AT the outset, the writer of this paper would disclaim belief in any restatement of doctrine as in itself sufficient to win our modern world to the Gospel of Christ. The history of Apologetics might appear to the student a wearisome account of outworn arguments for which nobody has any further use. Nevertheless, there is one argument which never becomes out of date, and has been in force from the early days of Christianity, when Aristides wrote his apology, until the present day, an argument so strikingly demonstrated in Mr. Begbie's *Broken Earthenware*, namely, that the truth of Christianity can best be proved by her power to change men's hearts and lives. The best apology for Christianity is Christ, let Him be seen in His followers, and that will constitute the best expression of doctrine for the new age.

Again, it cannot be too strongly stated that we are living in a transition period. Unlike the fourth and the fifth centuries of the Christian era, which witnessed the formulation of the Creeds, we cannot appeal to any one school of philosophy as dominating the intellectual world of to-day. Even within the last hundred and fifty years, men like Kant and Hegel so impressed themselves upon the thought of the generations succeeding them, that many a theologian felt it to be his primary task to make his Christianity fit in, for better or for worse, with their particular philosophy. That time has passed and gone, and at present the omens do not appear favourable to its return. At best, the attempt to express doctrine in terms of the new age can be but of a very tentative character. The Eternal Mind is not the same as the modern mind, in other words, Christianity constitutes a challenge. Opposition she must expect to encounter in any and every age. There is in the preface to *Lux Mundi* the following somewhat unfortunately worded sentence: "The writers found themselves at Oxford together between the years 1875-1885, engaged in the common work of university education, and compelled for their own sake, no less than that of others, to attempt to put the Catholic faith into its right relation to modern intellectual and moral problems." Upon this has been passed the criticism that a more important point is, however, "to put modern intellectual and moral problems into their right relation with the Catholic faith," using the word Catholic in its widest sense.

It may be urged that so far we have only brought forward reasons which should induce us to desist from any attempt to modernize the Christian message. But even if that were possible, we should be untrue to the charge committed to our trust. Granted that there is a faith which was once delivered unto the Saints, that is only one side of the truth, valuable, in so far as it is a reminder, that in our

presentation of Christian truth the spirit and purpose of our Lord's teaching and mission must at all costs be preserved. But it is not the whole truth, and we must never forget that the main object of our Lord's coming was, not to make known a series of propositions, however true, about God, Himself, and our future destiny, but to bestow upon mankind the gift of eternal life, in and through Himself. Faith is essentially dynamic. Life can only be preserved and advanced by its entry into, and adaptation to new forms, and its capacity so to mould and transform them as to contribute best to its own development and enrichment. The necessity of translating the message of Christianity into the language and thought of the time was a task to which more than one writer of the New Testament, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, manfully addressed himself. The classic instance of this is the Fourth Gospel. The main purpose of the Evangelist was to present the life and teaching of Jesus Christ in such a manner as to render Him intelligible to the Hellenistic thought of his time.¹

Our first and foremost duty then is to seek to have the Mind of Christ in all things. Our second task is to express it in a language understood of the people. We must imbibe the spirit of our age and make it our own, if we are to rise above it and help to make it receptive to the Spirit of the Ages. Insight must precede denunciation even, if the latter is to be effective. Our message so often falls on deaf ears because our hearers say we are not living in their world. "To be in the world and yet not of it" is true in every sense of the word. Modernists we all ought to be, though it does not follow that we shall accept what is called "a reduced form of Christianity." Modernism has far more to do with a temper of mind than with the acceptance, or otherwise, of certain articles of the Christian faith.

Allusion has already been made to the Fourth Gospel. Our belief is, that it is to the Johannine form of Christianity that we may look for guidance in commending the Eternal Gospel to the men of good will belonging to our generation. There seem to be epochs in the history of the Christian Church when certain books of the Bible make an especial appeal. To be content with one example, it is generally conceded that the Pauline teaching expressed in the Epistle to the Romans first came to its own at the time of the Reformation. To-day, it would appear that the Johannine form of Christianity exercises a special attraction to thoughtful religious people. At all events we find there the promise, without which all attempts on our part would be of nothing worth, "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when He, the Spirit of truth is come, He shall guide you into all the truth . . . He shall glorify Me : for He shall take of Mine and shall declare it unto you" (St. John xvi. 13, 14).

With this somewhat lengthy introduction let us come nearer to our subject, "The expression of doctrine in terms of the New Age." A starting point may be made by taking some sentences of Dr.

¹ The Epistle to the Hebrews, judged by the standard of its age, was a Modernist book.

Inge's, in a book of essays entitled *Science, Religion and Reality*. The Dean writes: "The discovery that the earth, instead of being the centre of a finite universe, like a dish with a dish-cover above it, is a planet revolving round the sun, which itself is only one of millions of stars, tore into shreds the Christian map of the universe." . . . "Most certainly heaven and hell were geographical expressions. The articles in the Creeds on the descent of Christ into Hades, and His ascent into Heaven affirm no less: and it is obvious that the bodily resurrection of Christ is intimately connected with the bodily Ascension."¹ The Dean concludes by saying "we shall be driven to think of God less anthropomorphically, and of heaven as a state rather than a place—a state too, which is eternal in a deeper sense than unending time succession." According to him the expression of Christian doctrine has hitherto been in terms of the geocentric system, and it is incumbent upon the Church of God to retranslate it into language in which ample recognition is given to the Copernican view of the universe.

Apart from the many services which Dr. Inge renders to our age, he is entitled to our gratitude for the manner in which he awakens us clergy in particular from our dogmatic slumbers. But so far as the conception of heaven as a state rather than as a place is concerned, surely, most educated Christians nowadays take this for granted. Of all religions in the world Christianity, with her insistence upon the reality of the unseen, can experience no difficulty in adjusting herself to this view, nay, adjustment is hardly the right word, rather would we say she must welcome this new way of apprehending the universe as especially congenial to her beliefs and spirit. Long ago, in the Fourth Gospel, the qualitative idea of eternal life was emphasized, eternal life being experienced here and now, a present enjoyment, though an earnest of better things to come, uninterrupted by what men call death, which merely unveils to them that state of existence which is already theirs, provided that they are abiding in Christ, and Christ in them.

On the other hand it is when Dr. Inge bids us reconsider the form in which the Church has taught the truth of the Living and Exalted Christ, that he provides us with much food for serious thought. Here again we should turn to the Fourth Gospel, and we cannot but think that the manner in which both these two great events, the Resurrection and the Ascension, are considered, will strengthen the conviction of those who are of opinion that in this respect any attempt at their retranslation will run more than a risk of becoming a mistranslation. It may be taken for granted that as creation was, from one point of view, realized as the self-limitation of God, in like manner the Incarnation of God the Son was a further self-limitation. He who was with God came and lived under our human conditions. The Cross, the Resurrection, and the Ascension were regarded by the Evangelist not so much as separate events but as an organic whole; taken together they constitute the lifting up

¹ *Science, Religion and Reality*, edited by Joseph Needham (London: The Sheldon Press, 1926), p. 357.

of the Son of Man that all might be drawn to Him. They are stages in the freeing of our Lord from the earthly conditions which beset His mortal life. No longer then was His ministry to be confined to the lost sheep of the House of Israel, but He became the universal Saviour. Before His glorification His Presence was local, now it transcends the limits of space and time, and in the power of the Spirit becomes an inward and abiding Presence in the heart of every believing disciple. Now, if there is one truth which Historical Criticism has forced us to recognize, it is that our Lord, as God the Son Incarnate, in a large measure shared the views and opinions of the age in which He was born, and was compelled to make use of the current language and conceptions to embody forth His teaching, on the principle that truth requires two persons, one to speak, the other to receive. How, then, could He better impress upon His immediate disciples the truth that He was independent of spatial conditions, than for His last visible appearance to them to take the form of going up from this earth, a cloud receiving Him out of their sight, symbolizing thereby His complete transition to another state of existence, and the supremacy of the spirit over the body? Speaking of the Resurrection of Christ, may we quote the words used by Dr. Garvie of those who deny the complete Resurrection of Jesus, and would in his opinion substitute for it what is mis-called a spiritual Resurrection, amounting to no more than a survival of the soul, the body having been left to perish? "To insist," Dr. Garvie continues, "on the completeness of the victory over death is to expose oneself to a charge of materialism. Regarding this charge the writer will content himself with saying that to him it seems *materialism* to assume that God had not the power to transform a *natural* body into a *spiritual* (to use Paul's distinction), especially in the case of Him who is typical ideal man, the first-fruits from the grave, the first-born among many brethren, the beginning of the new Creation of God, and not *materialism* to believe that matter is the Creation, and so remains under the control of spirit."¹ From this we must turn to the conception of God which is fundamental, both to our religious life and worship. The differences existing amongst Christian people, and even more in the case of those who do not bear the Christian name, may be ascribed to the ideas they entertain respecting the ultimate Reality.

In the eighteenth century, Deism was the prevailing fashion of the day. The world was likened to a watch constructed by a very clever artificer, wound up, and left to go on by itself. God was wholly apart from His world, and regarded almost as an outside spectator; occasionally He might see fit to interfere with it, and then miracles took place. Against this the nineteenth century reacted with all its might. It was maintained that God is ever upholding the world by the word of His power, Himself constituting its inner ground and unity. Nature is His living garment, and in the evolutionary processes of nature His creative activity may be seen ever

¹ Cf. *The Christian Doctrine of the Godhead* (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1925), p. 89.

at work. "In Him we live and move and have our being." Thus has been outlined the twofold doctrine of the Divine Transcendence and Immanence. As in previous ages, the Christian Church has recognized that, far from being antagonistic to each other, they are complementary, and that both should find expression in the teaching and worship of to-day. She will re-echo St. Paul's words, "One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in all" (Eph. iv. 6). Of the two doctrines the belief in the Divine Immanence is the more congenial to the tone and temper of our age, in fact many go so far as to deny belief in the Transcendence of God, asserting that it is destitute of any religious value. Now "Immanence" is a term which, if admitting of no adequate definition, at least needs to be used with care. It must be sharply distinguished from Pantheism, which renders human personality illusory, and obliterates the tremendous distinction between good and evil. For the Pantheistic identity of the world with God, we should substitute dependence, and for the identity of us finite beings with the Absolute, communion with God in life and worship.¹ Then we can go on to emphasize the nearness of God, His accessibility to the human soul at all times and in all places, His participation in the sorrows and struggles of mankind:—"In all their afflictions He was afflicted," further that He has called us to be fellow-workers with Him towards the active realization in this world of the ideals of goodness, truth and beauty. In this manner may we emphasize the Humanity of God and the Divinity of man—for the Divine and the human are not antithetical terms—the supreme illustration being the Incarnation, which reveals the character and nature of God in a perfectly human life (cf. St. John i. 1, 14).

From the Divine Immanence, we must endeavour, with veiled eyes, to contemplate the Transcendence of God. Rudolf Otto in his famous book, *The Idea of the Holy*, has shown that whilst religion is closely related to other activities of the human spirit, it stands in its own right, e.g., it must not be confused with either ethics or philosophy. Man is endowed with the feeling of "the Wholly Other." He is confronted with the "Mysterium tremendum," a Power that fills him with awe and dread, and fascination, and is beyond his comprehension. Alongside of this, there has also been a recrudescence of Calvinism on the Continent, e.g., in Schmiedel's own university, Emil Brunner—and he is only one of a very active school—in his opening address held last year at Zürich, insisting on the absolute separation of God and man, God and the world, "God is alone the Lord, and all else is subject. God is alone the Giver, and all else merely a gift."² Whilst the philosopher may take his courage in his own hands and pursue his studies to their utmost limit, for the theologian it is only possible to do so to

¹ Cf. *The Philosophy of Religion*, by G. Galloway, D.Phil., D.D. (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1914), pp. 475-476.

² Cf. *Philosophie und Offenbarung* (J. C. B. Mohr, Tübingen, 1925), pp. 19, 48, and cf. two articles in the *Expositor* for March and April, 1925: "A Theology of Crisis," by Dr. Adolf Keller.

any profit with a tremble upon his lips and a fear clutching his heart. Strange to say, whereas in England orthodoxy is warned against anthropomorphism, those belonging to the Modern Positive school in Germany are accusing the Liberals of having in their writings projected their shadows upon God.

Exaggeration, of course, there is in all this, but it is an attempt to do justice to the doctrines of grace and Divine condescension as well as to the Majesty of the Most High. We gladly make our own the words of the late Professor Troeltsch:—"When the Bible speaks in marvellous language about the inaccessibility of the depths of the Divine action, which can never be measured, but always astonishes us afresh with its new disclosures of His life, this does not betoken the limitations of the Bible but its greatness. Just in this very point the Christian idea of God penetrates deeper than anything else we know."¹

Hence, in our worship, far more than at present, must we make room for times of silence, and the feelings of awe and holy fear should find expression in our preaching. The wonder of all wonders is that He who dwells in the light no man can approach unto should condescend to draw near to us sinful men. Occasionally we are allowed to have a glimpse of this. Never shall I forget how last year when administering the Holy Sacrament in the little Vereins-haus at Wengen, through the open window my eyes caught sight of the Silberhorn, clad in eternal snow. God's double dwelling-place. He who is so far away, and yet so near. The littleness of man as well as His exceeding greatness.

God is ever revealing Himself to man, whether as an individual "the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world," or in the events and movements of History, as well as in the non-Christian religions of the East. But just as in a man's life, certain actions of his may prove more self-revealing than others, so do we believe that the coming of Jesus Christ was *the* great act of God, wherein we are allowed to behold His true character and purpose.

So then, our conceptions of God must be determined by the teaching and life of our Blessed Lord. We must learn to recognize God in Christ. As we read His life, there steals over the heart the conviction that we are face to face with God, who in self-sacrificing love has stooped down to save us from sin and lift us up into fellowship with Himself. Although the Cross is the central point of our message, yet the incidents of the Lord's life must be allowed to tell their own story for the express purpose of enabling our people to learn about God in the way Christ would have us know Him. There is a considerable amount of justification for the complaint that "our inherited theology is vitiated by Greek alienations,"² but a

¹ *Glaubenslehre*, by E. Troeltsch (Duncker & Humblot, München und Leipzig, 1925), p. 152.

² This sentence is taken from Dr. Tennant's article "Divine Personality" in the *Congregational Quarterly*, Oct., 1924. "We are taught to conceive of God as before all things Infinite, Perfect, Immutible, Impassible, Timeless, Omnipotent." Cf. *The Doctrine of the Person of Christ*, by Sidney Cave, (Duckworth, London, 1925), p. 243.

far less respectable ancestry must be admitted for some of the views entertained by the average man. Many people, when they ascribe the word "Almighty" to God, conceive of Him as exercising His power after the manner of an Oriental despot, whereas the teaching of Christ, from the temptation in the wilderness to the Cross of Calvary, is very different from this. Christ cannot turn the stones into bread for Himself. In order to establish His Kingdom in the hearts of men, He cannot make use of force, or compromise with evil. "If Thou be the Son of God, come down from the Cross." And this was impossible, to save others He could not save Himself. God's Almighty Power is revealed to us in His carrying through the redemption of man in the Person of His Son.

We must now consider the subject of sin. God in Christ is ever summoning man to co-operate with Him in bringing nearer the coming of His kingdom, a work which will call forth all his powers and energies, and demand a life-long service of devotion and self-sacrifice. The Christian is called to a life of adventure and romance, but he will, ere long, discover that he is up against forces beyond his power to overcome or control, the sin in his own heart, and the organized forces outside him. Not too much emphasis should be laid upon theories as to the origin of evil, but the appeal can be made directly to a man's own experience. His sense of guilt is not a spectre of the imagination, it is deeply imbedded in his consciousness, as it is in that of the race, involving at the same time the feeling of responsibility, which presupposes endowment with the freedom to choose between different courses of action. Psychology, the youngest of the sciences, in the hands of many of her votaries, would lead us to adopt a purely deterministic view of human behaviour, and it will be the task of the defenders of religion to show that the freedom of the human will cannot be adequately dealt with on psychological grounds alone. An exalted view of human nature is bound up with a true conception of sin, man is not a mere animal, or a machine, but a child of God, who has sinned by his own fault, by his own most grievous fault, against His Holy Love. Such thoughts as these carry us to the very heart of the Gospel. Christianity is essentially a religion of Redemption. Our message to this coming age is to press home the truth that in our Lord Jesus Christ's victory over sin, ample provision has been left us to meet all the ills from which our torn, stricken and distressed world is suffering at this present time. Thus are we brought face to face with the great doctrine of the Atonement, and only in so far as we are preoccupied with this, have we any right to claim for ourselves the noble word Evangelical. And yet it is just this truth respecting which it is so difficult to be clear in our own minds, and to know how to present it so as to grip the minds and hearts and wills of the coming generation.

Alas! the time allotted to this paper has already been overstepped. Fortunately for our purpose a paper was read on this very subject by the Chairman of this Conference.¹ We may

¹ Cf. *THE CHURCHMAN* for July, 1925, pp. 208-214, esp. p. 213.

therefore presuppose what he said then as forming the basis of our views. Our conviction is that the Johannine method of presenting the Lord's Death will best help the coming age to understand its meaning and its truth.

Whatever the Cross means, it is an expression of the Father's eternal self-sacrificing Love at grips with sin, in terms of time. The perfect unity between the Father and the Incarnate Word is one of the great themes of that Gospel. That there was any division between the Father and the Son was unthinkable to the mind of the Beloved Disciple. The Son of God gave Himself on our behalf all through His life, reaching its culmination in the Cross when it was expedient for Him to die for the people. The Father in giving His only Begotten Son likewise gave Himself on our behalf. So then, there was a Cross in the heart of God before that one erected on the green hill outside the city wall.

Further the Evangelist would have us preach the life of Jesus Christ as being necessary for the understanding of the Cross. His life has redemptive significance as well as His Death.

Finally, we must remember that St. John presupposes the truth underlying St. Paul's view of forgiveness, in whose words we may, as a short summary of Christian truth, best express to the mind of the coming age the message of the Gospel.

"The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost."

NOTE.—This paper on the Expression of Doctrine in terms of the New Age, does not include the most important subject of its application to the new economic conditions of our time.

S.P.C.K. issues a second series of *Fifty-two Short Sermons* (6s. net) by the Right Rev. Gilbert White, D.D., who retired from the Australian See of Willochra last year after twenty-five years' service as a bishop, first for fifteen years in Carpentaria. These sermons are intended for the use of Lay Readers and they are well suited to their purpose. They cover a number of the fundamental subjects such as Sin and Redemption, the Holy Trinity, and the Resurrection, and many of the features of the Christian's life and duty. They are simple, yet full of teaching and of the interpretation of Scripture, which must always form the main part of the preacher's work.

Messrs. Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent and Co. have issued under the title *Daily Power: a Collection of Wise Thoughts and Golden Sayings*, nearly four hundred and fifty short contributions sent in by readers of *The Daily Express*. They are arranged and edited by H. S. (3s. 6d. net). Readers of the paper are familiar with the short note inserted daily from correspondents. They are always inspiring and suggestive, and many will welcome this neatly produced selection from them. They are wide in their range and cover many aspects of life, opening appropriately with R. L. Stevenson's well-known morning prayer.