

THE GRACE OF GOD.

BY THE REV. G. F. GRAHAM BROWN, M.A., Principal of
Wycliffe Hall, Oxford.

IT is in line with the traditions of the Oxford Conference that some aspect of the Reunion of the Churches be examined, and if necessary reported on; and in this connection I would recall some words of the Bishop of Gloucester: "To speak of Churches is erroneous. . . . We ought to speak of the Anglican schism, the Roman schism, the Wesleyan schism, and so on. . . . We are separate divisions or schisms of the Body of Christ."

It is a wise, and I believe a significant, change of approach, that we consider aspects of doctrine rather than reporting on schemes of Reunion which have issued from various sources. The consideration of the doctrine of Grace is not only one of the most thrilling subjects, but also one of the greatest magnitude. In fact, we might say, negatively, "No Grace, No Gospel"; positively "By the Grace of God I am what I am."

For reasons I need not mention here, the time which I set apart for the writing of this paper was commandeered, with the result that all that I hold dear has been pierced with an awl to the gateway of that city outside of which the verification of the Christian message was established. Again I realize that bond-service which is perfect freedom.

Had I been able to give the time to this subject, critics of this paper might have spoken of it as "a monument of the praiseworthy industry of a wholly uninstructed person"; if it be a monument at all, it can only be that of a blameworthy nostrum.

However that may be, we are fortunate that at this moment we have some outstanding books dealing with this subject of Grace. The two most important are, *The Doctrine of Grace*, edited by the Bishop of Gloucester, in which seventeen theologians investigated the differences between the Churches and gave it as their conviction that, provided the Churches agree in holding the essentials of the Christian faith, such differences would form no barrier to union between them; and, *Grace in the New Testament*, by Dr. James Moffatt. In the bibliography that he gives he states: "On the positive content of the idea, there is no better book in English or indeed, so far as I am aware, in any language, than Dr. John Oman's difficult and rewarding *Grace and Personality*."

To this last book I feel I owe more than I can say, and find in reading it over again that it has formed the background of much of such theological thinking as I have been able to do. Further, for this paper I have received considerable help from the Rev. G. F. Allen, Chaplain of Lincoln College, Oxford, Rev. L. B. Cross, Chaplain of Jesus College, Oxford, and the Rev. D. E. W. Harrison, Chaplain of Wycliffe Hall.

In the book on the *Theology of Grace* I find that there seems to be an insufficient examination of the doctrine set forth by Karl Barth, and in view of this let me state some of what would seem to be the more important points in this "existential" thinking on this subject.

1. The Trinity as Personal, rather in the sense of active in three personal ways in self-revelation than as three distinct centres of self-consciousness.

2. The Holy Spirit as transcendent, not to be equated with any faculty immanent in man, and present as an abiding possession of man.

3. The Holy Spirit as the subjective possibility of revelation ; i.e. God reveals Himself as Word, and God acts as Spirit in man, that man may have ears which do hear and do receive the Word.

4. Eschatology ; the eschatological now ; the coming moment at which eternity overshadows time, and at which God from eternity meets man in time.

From this the existential truth of God's grace may be considered as

- (a) the graciousness of Christ in forgiveness ;
- (b) the graciousness of the Spirit, enlightening man to receive the Word of forgiveness ;
- (c) an eschatological conception ; grace as the moment in which God is gracious and reveals His graciousness. Grace is not a quasi-physical enduring possession of man, but is the graciousness of God in the moment of self-revelation.

Further there emerges

(a) Grace as sanction. The graciousness of God in Christ provides a sanction to which man can only respond in gratitude, and before which having done all he will still be an unprofitable servant.

(β) The Word and the Spirit in guidance. The ethic of grace as distinct from the ethic of the law, i.e. the ethic of codes and principles, means listening and obeying from moment to moment in the concrete instant what God in this instant would have me do.

(δ) The Word spoken in a neighbour calling me aside to serve. The Spirit in conscience, not as a human faculty, but as the eschatological enlightenment of God. The graciousness of God in leading me in the concrete instant into action which is well pleasing in his sight.

The fact that Karl Barth claims that he has no system, and feels that a system is the ruination of theology, makes it difficult to criticize his point of view and teaching. It might be helpful to put forward some of the criticisms that are being made, but in doing so we realize that Barthianism is itself passing through a crisis, and in one sense it is never here and now, but is always becoming, and that what is said to-day by way of criticism may have to be withdrawn to-morrow.

Even if Barthianism has not got a theological system, yet it maintains that the single word of God occurring alike in revelation,

Scripture and preaching is the theme of dogmatic theology, and we are entitled to find out what is the fundamental philosophy behind this teaching. Clearly it is Transcendentalism, and that although God does strike down perpendicularly into this world, yet He only crosses the horizontal line at one point, and in a sense never touches the world. This is paradoxical, but it is quite in keeping with the Barthian view.

The Christian Church as a whole has moved away from the philosophy of transcendentalism, and probably it is just because so much of our thinking nowadays is an over-emphasis on the immanence of God, reaching practically to pantheism, that this extreme corrective has been developed. Ritschl's "value judgments," Troeltsch's religious "a priori," Otto's category of "The Holy," are all instances of this over-emphasis, and the value of Barthianism is the return to the thought of God as transcendent.

However, the merely transcendental view of God is not orthodox Christian doctrine. Because "the Word became Flesh and dwelt among us" we are compelled to view God both as transcendent and as immanent. "The Word became Flesh" is one of the key-notes of Barthianism, and Karl Barth definitely corrects the idea that Immanence and Incarnation are one and the same. Why is it that we feel Karl Barth's view of the transcendence of God also needs correction? While we may grant that the world is God's utterance, that the world depends on Him, that the world is other than God, though in Him we live and move and have our being, while (and this is very important) possessing the gift of freedom which must be used; and also grant that the world exists not merely in the sense in which ideas exist for a mind, but is Actual, and there is no real causation other than God's: yet there is an activity which is seen, for instance, in free will, and a relative independence of God permitted by Him; and therefore, any view of the relation of God to the world that merely regards God as transcendent, or even touching and yet not touching the world, lacks the fullness of the Christian revelation.

The relation of God to the world is not only transcendent, but immanent. This immanence does not mean identity, nor does it mean that the universe as we see it is merely an appearance of God, nor that the universe as it is is only caused by Him. Further, immanence does not mean that God is present everywhere, like a policeman, even if it be merely to guide the traffic, or that He is in the world as an architect is in the building, and never considers it again after its construction. In relation to transcendence, the immanence of God is seen in the maintenance of the world order as a whole by His action on all animate and inanimate objects, which are the constituent and relatively autonomous parts of the universe.

In fact, the reasons for positing the immanence of God in nature are similar to and connected with those for establishing and maintaining belief in God and His transcendent and creative activity. No one branch of science may in its limited scope suggest that there

is no immanence of God ; but Christian Theism, as it covers a wider range than any one of the sciences themselves, and in its comprehensive survey of the connection of things in the world, requires this immanence of God in nature to explain the universe.

From this it will be seen that Barthianism, and the question of Grace in his exposition, depends, as do all basic differences in theology, on the conception of God and of His relation to the world and to man. It hardly seems possible to criticize the Barthian view of Grace without criticizing the whole of this complex of ideas. The problem has been put very clearly for us by Dr. William Adams Brown, in his Memorandum on *The Theology of Grace*. The differences which are felt are :

(1) Whether God is to be thought of as completely transcendent of Nature so that His entrance into His universe in the sphere of religion, either in revelation or redemption, is purely miraculous ; or whether there is an element of kinship between God and the creature which makes his immanence in man in reason and freedom not only actual but natural.

(2) Whether God's self-revelation is purely of spirit to spirit, or does sense play an essential part in the communication of God's will to man and the mediation of His Grace ?

(3) Are we to think of God's self-revelation, as distinct from His contact with man through nature, as primarily given to individuals, or as socially mediated ? Does God deal with men one by one, speaking directly to each person the revealing and saving Word he needs, or has God provided in the Church a social medium through which His Will is authoritatively interpreted to each succeeding generation ?

(4) Is the special revelation when it comes complete and final from the first so that nothing needs to be added to it, or is it given bit by bit as man is able to bear it ? Does the Bible in its existing form, apart from oral tradition, contain all that man needs to know about God for his salvation, guidance and happiness ; or is there need of a continuing interpretation such as Orthodox and Roman Catholics believe to be given through tradition, the creeds and the theology of the Churches ?

But these differences apply to the whole subject. May I state (I have no time to do more), by way of information if not of warning, further criticisms that are being made regarding Barthianism ?

It is held by some eminent theologians that this system is a thorough-going Dualism, a dualism not only in religious but also in philosophical thought. Some interpret Barth as identifying the world with the Devil, and as maintaining that everything human is a misleading travesty of the divine. Human knowledge is not the gift of God, nor acquired by His gracious relationship ; it has no part in religion. The human mind cannot in any way lead a man to God. God leads only through the Word, which may or may not be found in the Bible. The great question in thinking about Barthianism is, " Where is the Word of God to be found ? " This,

for Barth, is a conception of vital importance, and yet is nowhere distinctly defined.

Further, this dualistic philosophy, if it be dualistic, can only lead us into Gnosticism, and put in its extreme form, the Word of God can only be heard and known by Barthianism, and so they have the Revelation. It is a simple step from this to conceive of the Word of God as being one of the æons emanating from a far-off God.

The insistence on spiritual knowledge, knowing and hearing the Word of God, has its value, but in the way in which the Barthians conceive of this knowledge being imparted, it is argued that man must almost become a vacuum. There is no guarantee of being filled with the Word of God, and if an individual claims that he possesses at one moment either the Grace of God or the Spirit of God, then assuredly that individual does not possess the Grace or the Spirit of God.

Again, in the exposition of the Word and the exigesis of the Bible there is a tendency for the Barthians to feel that they possess absolute truth, and there is a resort to an infallibility, and the evils connected with that conception are sure to follow, such as the enthronement of private judgment.

In view of all this, let us return, as Evangelicals always do return, to the revelation of God Whom our Lord perfectly revealed, as recorded in the Bible, and pray that the Holy Spirit may illuminate and may teach us the meaning of Grace. For us, the Grace of God, or as probably we should say, the Grace of God in our Lord Jesus Christ, is the Gospel, and the whole Gospel. A discussion of this simply means a discussion of the whole of theology, and we turn to the loving personal relationship of the Father to His children, who are redeemed by the precious blood of our Lord, and are sanctified by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Further, we who are set apart for the ministry remember that we are set apart to the ministry not only of the Word but of the Sacraments. So far Barth has not expressed his views as to the relation of Grace to the two Sacraments as instituted by our Lord, and so it would not be fair to criticize his teaching on Grace in the light of what we believe regarding these.

THE CHURCH IN ENGLAND. By F. J. Foakes-Jackson, D.D. Vol. III., Part II of *The Christian Religion*, edited by J. F. Bethune-Baker, D.D. *Camb. Univ. Press*, 1931. 2s. 6d.

A useful little book, written for schools, but presenting a clear sketch of English Church history, which adults can read with profit. It is defective in the brief account given of the Norman settlement of the English Church. Lanfranc is not even mentioned. The estimate of the Reformation is not quite sound. Something more than horror created by the Marian persecution lay behind the popular attitude to Protestantism. From Stuart times onwards a most useful sketch is supplied.

A. J. M.