

The Place of Theology

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CHRISTIANITY is essentially a way of life and not just a philosophy about life. To become a Christian is a matter not of theory but of practice and of transforming experience. Faith in Christ and loyalty to Him involve more than bare, and possibly barren, intellectual assent; they mean nothing less than personal committal and unfaltering daily obedience. This is unquestionably what glorifies God most obviously before men—not the orthodox declaration of the learned theologian, but the consecrated and sacrificial devotion of the martyr and the saints.

But Christian doctrine and theology are not, therefore, unimportant. If vital Christianity is an art and not a science, it nevertheless has a science, and only those who know and hold to it can ever excel in the art of Christian living. Mere pious aspiration and devout intention, however sincere and persistent, are not enough to make men free from the bondage of inherited prejudice and selfish misconception. Only the knowledge of the Truth will make us free. If we are to enter into life, if we are to avoid the ways which end in death, we need to know the Truth, and to know it with increasing discernment. Otherwise, how can we follow it and enjoy its benefits?

Further, full and detailed understanding of the Truth is the more necessary because the issues at stake in following or forsaking it are so momentous. Here we are confronted by nothing less than the choice between freedom and bondage, life and death. What is more, a careful study and an adequate comprehension of Divinely-revealed Truth are absolutely indispensable to faithful Christian devotion, because of ourselves—unless we allow ourselves to be instructed by the Spirit and informed by the Word of God—we are bound to choose the wrong road. For “the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps.” “There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.”

I.

The doctrines or dogma of Christianity are its governing principles—the truths which Christians hold, and by which they are held. As a necessary framework for the support of Christian living they may be compared to the bones of the human body. These bones are all necessary, and must be preserved unimpaired. If a bone is broken or removed, particularly if it is an important bone, full healthy function and movement are thereby hindered or even made impossible. For instance, if a man breaks a main bone in his leg, for the time he cannot walk, even though all the other bones in his body are sound. If he has to be moved, he must be carried. There are Christians in a somewhat similar spiritual state. The man who can help to rectify such a physical condition is a doctor capable of setting the broken

bone. In setting it the doctor does not heal it, but he puts it in the way of healing ; and everything depends upon its being set properly. To be able to set bones a knowledge of anatomy is indispensable. Just as a would-be doctor studies the parts of the human skeleton, so a would-be Christian preacher ought to study with care and in close detail the constituent parts of the system of Christian doctrine. For without such knowledge we cannot hope to be able to put the spiritually needy in the way of healing.

St. Paul calls true Christian doctrine sound or healthful. Knowledge of it by Christians, and its unbroken maintenance in the Church, are absolutely essential to spiritual health. As the opening sentence of the so-called Athanasian Creed says, according to the probable meaning of the original Latin, " If any man would be in a sound or healthy spiritual state, before all things it is necessary that he hold fast the Catholic faith." If, like St. Paul, we are to fight a good fight and to finish our course, to endure faithful to the end, we must keep the faith. Or again, if we are to fulfil a helpful Christian ministry, we need, by holding to the faithful word, to acquire an ability to exhort believers in the healthful doctrine, and to convict the gain-sayers. (See Titus i. 9). The study of doctrine is therefore indispensable. To neglect it is to endanger our own spiritual health and to fail to acquire the knowledge necessary to help others to become and to keep spiritually fit.

Knowledge limits and determines use. Theory affects practice. The way to change a man's conduct is to change his beliefs. " As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he." These truths are so obvious as scarcely to need illustration. The more a man knows of what a thing will do and how to use it, the more he will turn to that thing when in need. Electricity is an amazing force. It is capable of very many uses. But those who would use it to advantage need to know and to abide by its laws. Otherwise, instead of obtaining benefit, they may suffer damage from handling it. People of ancient days, who thought matter was evil, and man's physical body of no worth, were led by this belief either into reckless indulgence or rigorous asceticism. What they believed determined what they did.

Similarly, because of the fresh and fuller discovery, at and after the Reformation, of the supreme value in the sight of God of the individual soul, and of the free and equal right of access to God of all alike, without distinction, through Christ the one Mediator, many men in these last four centuries have laboured and suffered and died—and more have done so in our own day—to uphold the rights and to secure the liberty of the individual. Faith in the sanctity of human personality is something which Christianity has inspired. But this very belief in the rights and liberty of the individual, true and important as it is in its place, unless it is complemented by belief in the sovereignty of God and belief in man's continual and necessary dependence on Him, and in the ultimate unity of God's purpose for all men in Christ, only leads in practice, as modern history has shown, to unhealthy self-assertion, unsocial individualism, merciless economic competition and increasing international war.

Instead of worshipping God as a dependent creature, and delighting in trustful obedience, man has become his own end and a law unto himself. As some cynic has said, "The Englishman is a self-made man, and worships his maker." Still worse, we have seen Germany striving to be a self-made state, to establish a self-made empire, and to worship Hitler as its personified spirit.

Or again, instead of joining fully with others in the corporate life and the mutual service of the larger family of God's purpose, men have tended to shut themselves off, each within his own preserve to do each as he liked, and to tell his inquisitive and impertinent neighbour to mind his own business. So the Englishman's home has been his castle, defended against the intruder, and consequently not altogether a place in which homeless evacuees may easily find a welcome! Protestantism has been a multiplicity of sects, unable to unite in the common cause of educating the rising generation in the fear of God and in the knowledge of Christian Truth. Social progress has been hindered by the unyielding tenacity of privileged minorities, who have in their own eyes done no more than claim their rights as individuals. There has arisen open friction and ill-feeling, both socially and internationally, between the "haves" and the "have-nots."

A violent reaction in thought and practice has inevitably followed—first communism within the state, and then Hitlerism among the states, both seeking to override by forcible and revolutionary methods the right to possession of those who seem to have more than their fair share. In Germany, as we have seen, totalitarian Nazism swept aside all belief in the right of the individual man or state, and made Germany and Hitler the one end of all its policy. There seems to be no limit to the devilish evils to which such reaction can lead. The human race, having failed in spite of its Christian enlightenment to acknowledge and trust in God, who gave man his potential dignity, and who alone can make possible its true realisation, has come under the curse of trusting in itself. "Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the Lord."

All this unbalanced or one-sided practice of the past can only be properly rectified, and the obvious and awful excesses and evils of violent reaction restrained and avoided, by the re-discovery and fresh application to life of those other equally important Christian truths, which, in their zeal for the truths which have given them individual freedom and importance, most men, even genuine professing Christians, have tended to overlook. In these days of tremendous upheaval and inevitable change, if we as Christians are rightly to appreciate, and not foolishly to abandon, what of Christian good we have inherited, and if we are to rectify the grievous deficiencies and obvious one-sidedness of some of our past ways of life by a new but not undue emphasis on other complementary Christian truths about life, it is Christian doctrine which we need to study and more fully to grasp. For the only adequate equipment with which to face, and to seek to solve, the vast problems of our day and generation is not simply faith, however zealous, in one or two truths of Christianity,

but nothing less than a thorough knowledge and an obedient devotion to the whole Truth of the Christian Gospel—the Truth as it is in Jesus.

II.

This need to recognise the practical importance of a knowledge of Christian doctrine is the more urgent because for a generation or more doctrine has been disliked. In our modern universities students have been expected to be acquainted with every view and to be dogmatic about no view. The reading of so-called theology, far from establishing students in informed and unhesitating Christian conviction, has resulted, in the majority of cases, in the development of a spirit of tolerant and liberal uncertainty. In the supposed pursuit of Christian love men have neglected the study, and forsaken the observance, of Divine law. Consequently, in spite of their genuinely good intentions, they have lost their way. For, as Jesus Himself said, "If thou wouldst enter into life, keep the commandments." The only way to enter into life, the life of love, is by fulfilling the law—by observing to do all that is written therein. Justification before God and the sanctifying Spirit are given to the penitent believer in Christ in order that he may be put right and kept right with the law of God—"that the righteousness of the law may be fulfilled in us who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit." Yet how few hold with conviction and can teach with authority a knowledge of the character and the precepts of God as revealed in His Word.

Love is the fulfilling of the law; because to the stern, cold and exacting letter of command or prohibition love adds the spirit of warm and glad and willing obedience. The spirit of love delights in the law. But many in this modern age have been tempted into thinking that they can disregard the law, and throw off restraint, supposing that in the fancied possession of a Christian spirit they have something better, and so need the law no longer. Such neglect of law and of its practical applications is nothing less than suicidal folly. It is a denial of the spirit of Christ, Who said, "Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or tittle shall in no wise pass from the law till all be fulfilled." Consequently many have a zeal but not according to knowledge. They are on the wrong road; and yet they are trying in their pursuit of it to exhibit a Christian spirit.

Let some quotations show that many are now alive to these realities of the situation. In "*The Ten Commandments in the Twentieth Century*" (S.P.C.K., 1941) John Drewett writes, "It is possible to distinguish between the rules of a game and the spirit of a game. You may keep all the rules and yet have a very unhappy game, because, as we say, the spirit was lacking. The Commandments are rules of life, but the Gospel supplies the spirit. We may have the right spirit, but if we don't keep the rules we shall not be able to play the game at all. Love goes beyond justice but it can never tolerate injustice, and often Christian love, because it thinks justice is a hard thing, degenerates into a shallow sentimentality" (page 12). "Amos . . . had he lived to-day . . . would have recognised that modern science had revealed to this generation the universality of natural

laws. On this knowledge we have constructed our machine age. . . . But, at the same time, as he was impressed with our conquest of nature, Amos would have been appalled at our utter disregard for moral laws . . . Amos would see a scientific civilisation using its knowledge of the physical world for its destruction, because it has failed to observe those other laws, which God has laid down in the realm of human conduct, and which are as binding in their own sphere as the laws of physics are in engineering. The supreme irony of our civilisation is that it is based on the universality of natural law, but has as thoroughly rejected moral law as any of the former civilisations" (page 21).

In "*Creed or Chaos*" (Hodder and Stoughton, 1940) Dorothy L. Sayers, writing at the beginning of the recent war, says, "We are waging a war of religion. Not a civil war between adherents of the same religion, but a life-and-death struggle between Christian and pagan . . . Even those who say it is a war to preserve freedom and justice and faith have gone only half-way to the truth . . . At the bottom it is a violent and irreconcilable quarrel about the nature of God and the nature of man and the ultimate nature of the universe ; it is a war of dogma . . . It is our own distrust of dogma that is handicapping us in the struggle. The immense spiritual strength of our opponents lies precisely in the fact that they have fervently embraced, and hold with fanatical fervour, a dogma, which is none the less a dogma for being called an 'ideology'. We on our side have been trying for several centuries to uphold a particular standard of ethical values which derives from Christian dogma, while gradually dispensing with the very dogma which is the sole rational foundation for these values" (pages 7, 8). "It is worse than useless for Christians to talk about the importance of Christian morality unless they are prepared to take their stand upon the fundamentals of Christian theology. It is a lie to say dogma does not matter ; it matters enormously" (page 12). "Theologically, this country is at present in a state of utter chaos, established in the name of religious toleration, and rapidly degenerating into the flight from reason and the death of hope. We are not happy in this condition and there are signs of a very great eagerness, especially among the younger people, to find a creed to which they can give whole-hearted adherence" (page 14).

Speaking in Convocation in May, 1940, Dr. Michael Furze, then the Bishop of St. Albans, said, "The people of this country want to be Christian but they have largely been living on the heritage of the past, and unless it is ensured that the foundations of Christian character are securely and permanently laid by the teaching of Christian doctrine within the fellowship of the Christian Church, there is no guarantee that this country will not revert to paganism."

Writing the Introduction to "*The Cambridge Syllabus of Religious Teaching*" (published 1937), Dr. J. S. Whale said, "Many discerning people now realise that unless a rediscovery of Biblical Christianity takes place in the near future, the new generation will lack even an emotional attachment to Christian faith and practice, and that in becoming unchristian it will soon be definitely anti-christian."

In April, 1941, Karl Barth wrote "*A Letter to Great Britain from Switzerland*" (Christian News Letter Book, No. 11). In this he pointed out that many of the reasons put forward by Englishmen for the necessity of resisting Hitler were thought to be Christian, when as a matter of fact they were not fully Christian at all. They were only humanitarian. He made bold to say quite bluntly that the conceptions put forward by many "are concerned with principles which might also be those of a pious Hindu, Buddhist or Atheist; and that, however beautiful and fruitful they may be, they do not touch at all on the peculiarly Christian truths on which the Church is founded" (page 16).

What many, therefore, have for some time been realising is our desperate need of Christian theology—"a rediscovery of Biblical Christianity," as Dr. Whale puts it. We need to gain, to hold firmly and uncompromisingly, and then to be held and dominated by, Scriptural conviction about God and His Truth. We need to be in a position to give as our reason for our chosen path of conduct not some humane consideration only, but the Word and the will and the glory of God alone. We need in new and far deeper ways, and with much more far-reaching application to daily life, to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness; to replace the ideals of humanism by the compelling theological convictions of Christian believers; to become genuine disciples of the Christ by seeking to understand and humbly to submit to and to abide by the meaning for us of His Word of revelation. (See St. John viii. 31, 32). Then we shall know the Truth; and the Truth will set us free. Then we shall be able to answer men's moral questionings and religious hunger with the God-given authority of faithful stewards and able ministers of the Word of God. "Thus it is written, and thus it must be."

For Christianity is essentially and undeniably doctrinal. Without doctrine, and right doctrine, we cannot have or practise Christianity. The Christian faith cannot be handed on without doctrine, clearly stated and effectively taught. From the first the early Christians continued stedfastly in the Apostles' doctrine or teaching (Acts ii. 42). This is the true apostolic succession—not to have an unbroken line of orders from St. Peter, but to hold fully and unfalteringly to the faith once for all delivered to the saints. In Christianity it is the doctrine which is permanent and unchanging. Christians, by the inspiration of the Spirit, may continually discover in it fresh and fuller implications, and see new and more far-reaching applications, but no new Truth can be added to the God-given revelation. Only those who accept and hold to the deposit of doctrine, to the Word written, can become or remain truly Christian.

III.

Our present danger is lest, through the widespread lack of acquaintance with the fulness of Christian Truth, we fail as Christians to rely on and to use our resources of God-given revelation, and follow others in looking elsewhere for the much-needed light. For the age in which we find ourselves needs a comprehensive all-embracing view of life and history big enough to encompass the vast world problems

of our day. Such a full-orbed view Christianity has ; but very few Christians have it.

Dr. Arthur Dakin, Principal of the Baptist College, Bristol, in an article on " Calvin's Age and Ours " (*Expository Times*, July, 1941) says, " We tend to approach theology from the point of view of particular problems . . . We thus deal with aspects ; and to a large extent they remain aspects. We specialize on points—important points no doubt ; but we miss the compelling power of the whole. The truth is that we assume in our theological teaching that the student begins with the comprehensive view, take it for granted that he knows Christian theology in its main outlines, then proceed to make him wise at disputed points. I have learned that the assumption is unwarranted. The student of to-day simply does not know. And, moreover, one can be a student of modern theology for a very long time without ever feeling the compelling power of Christian dogma as a whole . . . We have ideas, Christian ideas many of them ; but we lack the co-ordination of them into a coherent and cogent system. Yet nothing less than a complete system, one would think, can match the confusion of our time."

We need to regain the habit of God-centred thinking. We need to study, to take pleasure in, and to seek out, the greatness of the will and the ways and the works of God, to seek in reverent contemplation to appreciate more of His character, His majesty and His glory. We need to break away from our puny limited self-centred outlook, into which we only bring in the thought of God in relation to ourselves and our own immediate interests, to see the whole of life, creation, history, providence, judgment and redemption in their relationship to God. The thought which such contemplation produces is theology ; the interpretation of the ways of God with men to which it leads is doctrine ; and it is such theology and such doctrine for which men wait. The people that do know their God shall be strong and do exploits. Without such vision and such knowledge the people perish.

It is such all-embracing knowledge which Paul prayed might be given, not just to himself or to one or two learned theologians, but to all the Christians of the churches in Asia. He coveted for them by Divine illumination and unveiling a comprehensive grasp of the greatness of God's purposes—purposes starting with His deliberate choice before the foundation of the world, and finding their consummation in a dispensation of the fulness of the times in which all things are to be summed up in Christ. (Eph. i. 3-23, etc.). For Christ is the source and the sustainer and the consummator of all things. By Him they exist. In Him they consist. Through Him and His cross and blood-shedding they have been reconciled to God. He fills and fulfils all things. He is far above all, in all things pre-eminent. It is this greatness of Christ which we need to grasp, if, as Christians, our thinking is to be big enough to see world problems in their true perspective, if we are to possess and to make known God's Gospel for our times. In other words, we need to gain a new and much greater acquaintance with the fulness of the doctrine of God in Christ—that is, with Scriptural Christology, and Biblical Christianity.

This task, according to the New Testament, is a task for all. If Paul's prayers are still to be answered, all Christians ought to be theologically-minded, all Christians ought to be well taught in doctrine. The task is, therefore, a task for us. Further, it is certain that the majority of Christians will not pursue this way of knowledge unless some set a lead, and can by their teaching help others to follow. The Christian Church needs more workers able to give sound Scriptural teaching, and solid doctrinal teaching, teaching set forth in a way suitable and intelligible to particular listeners. Who better can undertake this task than those who are fully persuaded of the Deity of Christ, of the sole sufficiency of His redeeming work, and of the final authority of the Holy Scriptures as the rule of faith? Who better can undertake this task than those who pray to and trust in God to endue them with the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him? Yea, more, without these things the task cannot be properly undertaken. This is why the failure of evangelicals, both to study and to teach Christian doctrine, has had such serious consequences. Let us, then, fail no longer. Let us without further delay, or excuse, or indolent presumption, set out to make ourselves masters of the doctrines which we profess so zealously to hold, that we may not be mere negative defenders or guardian watch-dogs of orthodoxy, frightening people away by our severity, but positive exponents of Biblical theology, attracting hearers both by the life-giving truth which we proclaim, and by our own obvious knowledge of our subject. Let us set ourselves, let us make it our ambition, ever more fully to know Whom we believe, and what we believe, to the full extent which Divine revelation makes possible, that we may be able to give a reason of the hope that is in us, and to set forth more effectively, both to God's glory and to men's edification, the fulness of the Truth as it is in Jesus.

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sickness. Let us concentrate by all means on the promotion of spiritual life. But when we say that, we ask also for doctrine, for apologetics, for ethics, for history, for worship, above all for the study of the Scriptures.

By these weapons the Holy Spirit does His work of grace among His people. Those who are called to be the instruments of the Spirit's work must see to it that that work is not made any the less effective through any lack of diligence on their part in applying themselves, not only to prayer and to the study of the Bible, but also to the better and wider and fuller understanding of the faith in all its aspects.

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