

# Death and Doctrine<sup>1</sup>

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And so, since we have now been justified by Christ's sacrificial death, we shall all the more certainly be saved through him from final retribution (Romans 5:9, NEB).

In dying as he died, he died to sin, once for all, and in living as he lives, he lives to God (Romans 6:10, NEB).

Scarcely a fraction of the huge labour of scholarship which has gone into elucidating the epistle to the Romans is known outside the very small circle of professional New Testament scholars. It would probably not be an exaggeration to say that what is publicly known of Paul's thought on the matter of the salvation of man would run something like this: Man, though created free, has fallen; all men share alike in the guilt of sin and are due to be damned; but God has sent his Son to rescue man from damnation, which rescue is mysteriously accomplished by his death and resurrection, at least so far as those who put their trust in him are concerned; the purpose of preaching the Christian faith is, thus, to persuade men to believe that Jesus Christ is able to rescue them; once they do believe this, they are rescued. Hence the vital importance of correct doctrine.

Put thus boldly it can be made to sound very odd. It appears that salvation is accorded to those who make the effort to believe. Justification by faith has become justification by the work of human believing. At one stage in the history of Protestantism, in the period of so-called Protestant scholasticism, you could find those who maintained that a capacity to articulate correctly the doctrine of justification by faith was a necessary condition of being saved; and it was this tradition of Christianity which consistently produced generations of highly instructed Christian lay people, perhaps the best educated laity ever known in the history of the church. And yet there would be many who would say, and Protestants among them, that this tradition became too cerebral in its understanding of the implications of being Christian.

## Holding a doctrine

I would like to offer two preliminary remarks to take this matter a little further:

1) The first concerns the general relation of Christian doctrine and Christian living. An opinion of long standing, on which we all fall back from time to time, sees doctrine and living related to each other

as one might relate theory and practice. The doctrine exists as a body of theory to be learnt, and then, subsequently, having been mastered, to be put into practice. This tradition is very far from being satisfactory, both in the misleading fact-like quality it attributes to doctrine and the divorce between belief and practice which is presupposed in the external way in which they are related.

It is in correction of this over-simplified opinion that I want to offer the following distinctions: expressing a doctrine, holding a doctrine, and realizing a doctrine. Expressing a doctrine is uttering it verbally, and making it available to conceptual analysis. Holding a doctrine means mentally entertaining it, worrying about it, wrestling with it, participating in the conflicts it throws you into, when its reference points in human living are made clear. Realizing a doctrine means being so transformed by it, so that words, attitudes and actions flow naturally from the sense of it.

Needless to say this, too, is dramatically over-simplified, but the distinction is important for what I want to try to argue. Holding a doctrine is a vital stage of mental, moral and spiritual reflection, without which there is neither understanding nor practice of the Christian faith. Its significance for my subject I shall try to illustrate in the second half of this article.

2) My second preliminary point is the observation that, among the major Christian theologians whose work most obviously bears the mark of such reflection, I would name Martin Luther. Outside certain rather restricted circles it seems that Luther's reputation could hardly be lower. Nearly fifty years ago, an Anglican commented:

Today Martin Luther, the greatest protagonist of the Reformation, is viewed as a vulgar, violent and mistaken man as hostile to humanist culture as he was to social democracy. And the Reformation he achieved is regarded as the parent of a malign progeny which shattered the religious unity of Western Europe and gave rise to a multitude of 'petulant capricious sects, the maggots of corrupted texts'.<sup>2</sup>

So far from that being an adequate or appropriate view of Luther's significance, one ought to be able to recognize that he is the outstanding figure to reflect that profound process of conflict and struggle into which holding a doctrine plunges the Christian. 'Experience alone makes the theologian', and the fruit of that experience is evident in his profound wrestling with the Catholic faith.

My article, then, is about holding a doctrine. But is death a doctrine? Is there a Christian doctrine about death which one can express, hold and realize?

## **Death and the wrath of God**

Unquestionably, the Christian answer would once have been 'yes'.

Psalm 90 and Romans 6 would have provided the texts; Augustine or Luther the commentary. Death, it would have been said, is caused by God's wrath against our sin; it is its 'wages'. The abundant turmoil and miseries of life, especially experience in the declining years, are the signs of God's anger against man; and 'the fact that we die is the result of God's indescribable wrath over sin.'<sup>3</sup>

The rational reaction to this doctrine is perfectly clear and intelligible. What grounds are there at all for thinking of death as other than a natural condition? If humanity has always been subject to ageing and death, how can sin have any causal connection with these processes? Is it not a pure confusion to see in these processes, however distressing, anything whatsoever to connect them with God's wrath? And is not confusion compounded if God is depicted as visiting upon humanity an anger which it has no way of avoiding?

The 'wrath of God' is not a phrase which we naturally, or happily, use today, especially not in connection with death. There is one example of the pains taken to avoid it, which it is a little unfair to cite, perhaps, but it is there for us to observe and ponder.

In the burial service of the 1662 Prayer Book, two psalms are set, one of which is Psalm 90: 'Lord, thou has been our refuge, from one generation to another'. Needless to say, in the Prayer Book all the verses of the psalms are included. Generations of mourners have heard the words:

For we consume away in thy displeasure:  
and are afraid at thy wrathful indignation.  
Thou has set our misdeeds before thee:  
and our secret sins in the light of thy countenance.  
For when thou art angry all our days are gone:  
we bring our years to an end, as it were a tale  
that is told.

But in the revised service of Series 3 (now the *Alternative Service Book*), every single one of these verses is omitted (and, let it be said, I am not among those who decry modern services). Modern congregations are thought, for whatever reason, not to need to hear these words at a funeral; not indeed verse 11, specially omitted between verses 10 and 12, containing (in the new *ASB* psalter translation) the words:

Who can know the power of your wrath?  
who can know your indignation like those that fear you?

The very ones, in other words, who should understand the power of the wrath of God, the psalmist is saying, are those who actually fear and acknowledge God.

The rational reaction to the idea of death as caused by the wrath of God is certainly part of the painful process of what I mean by 'holding

a doctrine'. But why suffer? Why not drop the idea altogether? Why speak of God in this crudely vindictive kind of way?

At this point the Christian will certainly want to pause. The Old and New Testaments, especially the Old, are replete with reference to 'the wrath of God'. Has he not a duty to wrestle further with the concept, even to the point of connecting it with human death? The problem of speaking about God in the language of human emotion is by no means restricted to 'wrath'. Has he not a duty to penetrate further into the theme of God's judgement, as much as into his grace or love? The tradition which he inherits cannot be easily cast aside; and there is another consideration for not doing so. He will find, if he seeks to avoid the moral problem of supposing that God actually punishes persons in their death, that precisely the same problem arises with similar acuteness, but in another place. For is it morally any easier to suppose that God has merely arranged the conditions in which beings are brought into existence to suffer on their own the common miseries of the human lot? The original moral dilemma simply reoccurs; and whatever supposed advantages have been gained by sheltering God from direct casual responsibility for human misery are more than offset by the loss of a sense of immediacy to God, which is so essential a part in a living faith.

### **'Holding' the wrath of God**

It is here that the process of 'holding a doctrine' becomes so important. It is the essential moment in faith where the seeker for truth opens himself to the full range of possibilities in the tradition he has embraced, and as full a range of experience as he can envisage. The power of the purely theoretical objections is suspended until as much as possible has been explored of the richness of the original symbol.

Luther knew the theological problem of speaking of the wrath of God, as did Augustine before him; and neither of them produced anything like a theoretically satisfying solution. What they both did, especially Luther, was to wrestle with the idea in relation to the basic experiences of human life. It is this wrestling which I commend as entailed in 'holding a doctrine'.

This comes out, in particular, in Luther's delight in the Christian use of the book of Psalms. If there is importance in persisting with the Christian tradition of speaking of the wrath of God, then it lies in that sense of immediacy to God found in this 'little Bible', as Luther called it. Where, he asked, can one find nobler words to express joy, and where

more penitent, sorrowful words in which to express grief than in the psalms of lamentation? ... In these, you see into the hearts of all the saints as if you were looking at death or gazing into hell, so dark and obscure is the scene rendered by the changing shadows of the wrath of God.<sup>4</sup>

The Christian tradition invites one to hold oneself at this point—at the point of seeing in death the outcome and expression of the wrath of God—in case one may then see how, by a strange reversal, the nature of God's act in Jesus Christ has a new depth, meaning and power.

For every encounter with death is, as we may know, acutely demanding. It exposes something in us almost too deep for words, sometimes fears we can hardly articulate, and emotions we find it too painful to acknowledge—and anger, too. Dying, moreover, confronts in a bewildering variety of forms. Some die very young, others old and full of years. Some die peacefully, some after great struggles. There are sudden accidental deaths caused by human failure or incompetence; there are deaths from disease or natural causes. It catches some prepared and some unprepared. The ancients realized long ago that there was no rhyme or reason in the manner in which people die. In the words of Psalm 49, 'We see that wise men die: and perish with the foolish and ignorant' (Psa. 49:10, new translation).

The bleak realism of this view is deeply lodged in the Bible. Various attempts are made in the Old Testament to devise theories according to which the righteous die happy deaths, whereas the wicked are punished in their dying. But the book of Job is the answer to all that. We *know* it isn't true. It is said of *all* men, and not just the wicked:

You cut them short like a dream; like the  
fresh grass of the morning.  
In the morning it is green and flourishes:  
at evening it is withered and dried up.  
And we are consumed by your anger; because of  
your indignation we cease to be (Psa. 90:5-7).

This is the most realistic verdict of the Old Testament upon human life; and it ought to be the man of faith who particularly perceives it and learns from it.

Teach us so to number our days: that we may  
apply our hearts to wisdom (Psa. 90:12).

## Praising God in death

And yet, in nothing is the Old Testament so much distinguished from the New as in its attitude to death. The conviction that Christ also gave himself up to death, had triumphed over death and had risen from the dead—that conviction yielded an utter transformation of attitude. In dying itself, nothing had changed. Christians continued to die in all the variety of ways common to men, and martyred Christians in some less common. The 'sting of death' was still (as in the psalms) 'sin'. 'Thou has set our misdeeds before thee' was still part of Christian experience.

The difference made by Christ's resurrection was that now the Christian could praise God in dying.

The sting of death is sin . . . But thanks be to God  
who gives us the victory through our Lord  
Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:56-57).

That is a direct negation of the words of the psalmist:

The dead do not praise the Lord:  
nor do any that go down to silence (Psa. 115:16).

It is a complete reversal of the expected answer to the question:

Can the dust give you thanks, or declare your  
faithfulness? (Psa. 30:9).

This reversal provided, in due course, the grounds for the verse in St Francis of Assisi's 'Canticle of the Sun':

And thou most kind and gentle death  
Waiting to hush our latest breath,  
O praise him, allelulia

The resurrection of Christ means that our living is changed by a changed attitude to death. Death still is the acutest sign of God's wrath against our sinfulness, and dying can be hard work. But it is precisely because our view of death has changed, that its impact on our living has been changed too. Where the psalmist, in the face of the signs of the wrath of God in the realities of human dying, prayed to be taught to number his days and apply his heart to wisdom, St Paul, contemplating the hope of resurrection, can provide a concrete programme of work:

Therefore, my beloved brothers, stand firm and immovable, and work for the Lord always, work without limit, since you know that in the Lord your labour cannot be lost (1 Cor. 15:58).

It is here, of course, that 'holding a doctrine' passes over into 'realization'.

There is just one final point. In Romans, Paul sees the assurance of being ultimately saved from the wrath of God ('final retribution') as lying, paradoxically, not in the resurrection so much as in the cross of Christ. This is what Luther called 'the death of my death'<sup>5</sup>, the confronting of death with the death and resurrection of Christ. Because one man died like that, it is as if Paul is saying, no one need die like that again. In the death of Christ there is a finality which can transform all our dying. We die in the shadow of sin, but in the infinitely greater shadow of Christ's cross.

## CHURCHMAN

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### NOTES

- 1 Hulsean Sermon in the University of Cambridge, 1980.
- 2 H. D. A. Major, *The Modern Churchman*, 22, 1932, p.225.
- 3 *Luther's Works* (55 vols.) eds. J. Pelikan and H. J. Lehmann (Fortress and Concordia, Philadelphia and St Louis), 13, p.78.
- 4 ET, J. D. Dillenberger, ed., *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings* (Doubleday, New York 1961), pp.39-40.
- 5 *Luther's Works*, 26, p.160.