

GOD AS SPIRIT.

“God is a Spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth.”—*St. John* iv. 24.

THESE words are often quoted as if they were simple and easy to interpret. They are, in fact, quite the reverse. They introduce us to a subject at once the most difficult and the most important that can be offered for our consideration. For the subject is the nature of God, and that is the most difficult of themes. One need not be a theologian to understand that man's limited powers are not equal to the task of comprehending the Infinite and Eternal Being who is the source and spring of all created life. When we have said all that we know about God, we have not said half that ought to be said; we are fortunate, indeed, if we say nothing that ought to be left unsaid. No one who has tried to express to others his best thoughts about God is likely to claim that his words were satisfactory even to himself. This is the most difficult subject in the whole field of speculation.

And, as it is the most difficult, so it is also the most important subject in all the world. For upon a man's answer to the question, What is God? will depend not only his theories about life but a good deal of his practice. And the refusal to consider the question leads at last to the mental temper which the Psalmist describes as that of the fool who says in his heart, *There is no God*¹—the fool who believes whatever it gives him least trouble to believe.

I will consider first the implications of that definition or description of God which our Lord gave when He said “God is Spirit.” It is hardly a definition; perhaps a definition of the Infinite is something of a contradiction

¹ Ps. xiv. 1.

in terms. We must not expect to reach an exact or adequate definition. But at any rate the words of Christ suggest certain deep truths about the Divine Existence, which are always necessary for us to remember.

God is Spirit. We can only interpret such a saying through what we know of finite spirits, of the spirit of man, of our own selves. In truth we do not know a great deal even about this. What we call personality in man is something which psychologists find it increasingly difficult to define. Not to speak of abnormal cases in which the man seems to be possessed of a dual personality—or perhaps we ought to say in which two persons seem to inhabit the same body by turns—every one who has studied the ordinary phenomena of personal consciousness knows that the relation of spirit to body is hardly more clearly understood now than it was in the infancy of science. It is a secret which eludes and baffles the most patient inquiry. But the broad fact which forces itself upon our attention is that the spirit of man manifests itself in and through his material body, which we may call its home or its prisonhouse as we will, but which is, in any case, its ordinary habitation. Man's spirit resides, for the present at least, in a body which is its appropriate channel of communication with the outer world, while it is at the same time no merely passive resident, responsive inevitably to the interaction of organ and organ. In other words man's spirit, as we know it most familiarly, dwells in an environment to which it is superior. It transcends the physical order which yet is the medium through which its energy displays itself.

Now when we examine the Old Testament revelation about God, we find that stress is laid upon exactly these two aspects of Infinite Spirit. On the one hand we find it everywhere implied that the Spirit of God dwells in nature which is the sphere of His activity. *Whither shall*

I go from Thy Spirit? or whither shall I flee from Thy presence? asks the Psalmist. *If I ascend up into heaven, Thou art there; if I make my bed in Sheol, behold Thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there shall Thy hand lead me.*¹ *The whole earth is full of His glory*² is the prophet's cry, amplified by Christian devotion in the great words of the *Te Deum*, which declare not only earth but heaven to be full of the majesty of God's glory. And, on the other hand, it is taught again and again in Scripture that God transcends the universe which He has made, that we are not to think of Him solely as the Life or the soul of the world—though these be true thoughts—but also as the Author and Ruler of all, controlling every operation of Nature, although we see not His hand. *His way is in the sea, and His path in the great waters though His footsteps be not known.*³ Our conception of the Supreme is neither reasonable nor Biblical unless we think of Him as Spirit who is at once *in* and *above* Nature, who dwells in the nature which He rules. As Spirit, God pervades and vivifies and consecrates the visible order of things.

To say then that *God is Spirit* implies a great deal more than that He is not to be identified with the material forces of the universe. We might almost say that if this were all that these words mean they would convey no very deep lesson. There may, indeed, be races of men so low in the scale of intelligence that they do not perceive the impiety of giving the awful title "God" to any material object. Fetish worshippers *may* perhaps be found who are ready to adore sticks and stones as Deity, who actually identify God with the image they have made of Him. But the dwellers in Western Europe are unlikely to have much to do with beliefs of that sort. Every

¹ Ps. cxxxix. 7.² Isa. vi. 3.³ Ps. lxxvii. 19.

educated and intelligent man recognizes that whatever else we are to believe about God we *must* believe Him to be a Spiritual Being. Spirit is the highest category we know, and we are forced by a paramount necessity of reason to think of God as Spirit. But it is of real importance that we should understand the implications of this grave truth, and that we should not overlook the way in which it is presented throughout the Bible.

In the case of the human spirit, as has been said already, we know that it operates in and through a physical organism, the connexion between the two being so close and intimate that it is beyond our powers of imagination to conceive what the manner of existence of a disembodied spirit could be. Experience itself would teach us that the contrast between body and spirit is not of a nature which hinders their interaction. And what experience suggests is confirmed by the deepest philosophy which we have yet reached. The lofty idealism of a Berkeley or a Hegel does not deny the practical significance of what is called *matter*. It seeks, indeed, to express it in terms of spirit, but it does not suppose that thereby reality is denied to the external world in which we find ourselves. Nor, again, however we express the relation between spirit and matter, is it a maxim of idealist philosophy that matter is necessarily evil, or that its laws are hostile to the revelation of the Infinite Spirit whose life it interprets to us. There is no room in modern speculation for a dualism which sets matter over against spirit, or which finds, as the Gnostics believed, that the claims of both cannot be adjusted. When we say, then, that *God is Spirit*, we do not mean, nor does Scripture anywhere suggest, that matter is an evil thing, that God is hostile to, or that He keeps aloof from, the works of His own hands. For everything that He created *in the beginning* He found to be *very good*. It was the Spirit of God that brooded

on the face of the waters in the days before the making of man.

The suggestions of experience—the inferences of philosophy, the teaching of the Old Testament—all alike find themselves confirmed and explained by the revelation which is the centre of the Christian faith, that *the Word became flesh*, that the Eternal Spirit entered into union with the universe which was His own. *God is Spirit*; but the Incarnation of the Son of God has made it certain that the spiritual may reveal itself through the material. Of the Eternal Spirit it is said, “The womb of a Virgin did He not abhor.” Man’s body, as well as his soul, is a sacred thing, for it has been the temple of the Highest. What God has cleansed we dare not call common. Within our experience it is through the earthly that the heavenly is revealed and received. We need to remember that any philosophy—whether it call itself Gnostic or Spiritualist or Puritan—which seeks to divorce spirit from matter is not the philosophy of the Christian religion. And this has practical no less than theoretical consequences.

God is Spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth. That is sometimes repeated as if it meant that any act of worship in which man’s body takes part as well as his soul is necessarily unspiritual. But nothing could be further from the meaning of the words. The warning, indeed, is always needed that no worship in which man’s spirit does not join can be true or acceptable worship. We do not express our inmost selves by mere outward acts unless our wills co-operate with our gestures and our words. There can be no communion of man with man unless there is an interaction of mind with mind; mere bodily proximity is of no avail. And this which is true of the communications of finite spirits, the one with the other, is true also of the com-

munication of the spirit of man with the Spirit of God. There must be *personal* contact for an act of worship. But to suppose that the outpouring of the spirit must necessarily be less real or less sincere if it is accompanied by bodily acts is as unreasonable as to suppose that the affection we feel for our friends is rendered less genuine by the expression of it in words. Rather is it true that, as the body is the soul's appropriate organ and instrument, so the soul's instincts towards God are encouraged and stimulated by the effort, however imperfect, to express them by outward act or word. What calls itself worship is not worship at all, unless it be the outpouring of the spirit, but it is none the less worship if it manifest itself, as all deep emotions do, in outward guise. That we may mistake the outward sign for the inward grace is sadly true, but that does not justify us in denying the presence or the efficacy of the inward grace merely because it is accompanied by an outward sign. And too often has it happened that the neglect of outward religious observances has led to the abandonment of all inward strivings of the spirit after God.

We have, then, reached this point. The revelation of God as Spirit, which is now an inherited conviction of the immense majority of the human race, does not supply us with any justification for making little of the material medium through which it has pleased God to reveal Himself—in creation, in history, in the individual experience of men, most chiefly in the life of the Son of man. We do very ill if we think to approach God more nearly by despising that which He has not despised. Worship must be in spirit if it is to be in truth, but that does not exclude the expression of worship in material and outward form.

God is Spirit, and therefore He reveals Himself as the Transcendent One, Immense, Eternal, Infinite, the Lord

of Nature, the Master of human life. And so we say in awe and adoration, "I believe in God the Father Almighty."

God is Spirit, and yet that does not place an impassable barrier between Him and the creatures whom He has made. It is easier to grasp the revelation that we, the sons of men, are made in that awful Image when we remember that the Son of God became the Son of man. And so we say in thankfulness: "I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord."

God is Spirit, ever present in the world which He *upholds by the word of His power*,¹ ready to bless and to guide the poorest human soul which flings itself on His protection. And so we dare to say in reverence and in hope: "I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord, and Giver of Life."

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¹ Heb. i. 3.