

From a Lover of Love to an Object of Grace

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MIGHT I venture here to speak of myself, and of more than thirty years given to progressive thought in connexion, for the most part, with a pulpit and the care of souls. Will you forgive me? I am addressing young men who have the ministry before them, as most of mine is behind, strewn indeed with mistakes, yet led up of the Spirit.

There was a time when I was interested in the first degree with purely scientific criticism. Bred among academic scholarship of the classics and philosophy, I carried these habits to the Bible, and I found in the subject a new fascination, in proportion as the stakes were so much higher. But,

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282 fortunately for me, I was not condemned to the mere scholar's cloistered life. I could not treat the matter as an academic quest. I was kept close to practical conditions. I was in a relation of life, duty, and responsibility for others. I could not contemplate conclusions without asking how they would affect these people, and my word to them, in doubt, death, grief, or repentance. I could not call on them to accept my verdict on points that came so near their souls. That is not our conception of the ministry. And they were people in the press and care of life. They could not give their minds to such critical questions. If they had had the time, they had not the training. I saw amateurs making the attempt either in the pew or in the pulpit. And the result was a warning. Yet there were Christian matters which men must decide for themselves, trained or not. Therefore, these matters could not be the things which were at issue in historic criticism taken alone. Moreover, I looked beyond my immediate charge, and viewed the state of mind and faith in the Church at large—especially in those sections of it nearest myself. And I became convinced that they were in no spiritual condition to have forced on them those questions on which scholars so delighted and differed. They were not entrenched in that reality of experience and that certainty of salvation which is the position of safety and command in all critical matters. It also pleased God by the revelation of His holiness and grace, which the great theologians taught me to find in the Bible, to bring home to

me my sin in a way that submerged all the school questions in weight, urgency, and poignancy. I was turned from a Christian to a believer, from a lover of love to an object of grace. And so, whereas I first thought that what the Churches needed was enlightened instruction and liberal theology, I came to be sure that what they needed was evangelization, in something more than the conventional sense of that word. "What we need is not the dechurching of Christianity, but the Christianizing of the Church." For the sake of critical freedom, in the long run that is so. Religion without an experimental foundation in grace, readily feels panic in the presence of criticism, and is apt to do wild and unjust things in its terror. The Churches are not, in the main, in the spiritual condition of certainty which enables them to be composed and fair to critical methods. They either expect too much from them, and then round upon them in disappointed anger when it is not forthcoming. Or they expect so little from them that they despise them as only ignorance can. They run either to rationalism or to obscurantism. There was something to be done, I felt, before they could freely handle the work of the scholars on the central positions.

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And that something was to revive the faith of the Churches in what made them Churches; to turn them from the ill-found sentiment which had sapped faith; to re-open their eyes to the meaning of their own salvation; to rectify their Christian charity by more concern for Christian truth; to

284 banish the amiable religiosity which had taken possession of them in the name of Christian love; and to restore some sense not only of love's severity, but of the unsparing moral mordancy in the Cross and its judgment, which means salvation to the uttermost; to recreate an experience of redemption, both profound and poignant, which should enable them to deal reasonably, without extravagance and without panic, with the scholars' results as these came in. What was needed before we discussed the evidence for the resurrection, was a revival of the sense of God's judgment-grace in the Cross, a renewal of the sense of holiness, and so of sin, as the Cross set forth the one, and exposed the other in its light. We needed to restore their Christian footing to many in the Churches who were far within the zone which criticism occupies. In a word, it seemed to me that what the critical movement called for was not a mere palliation of orthodoxy, in the shape of liberal views, but a new positivity of Gospel. It was not a new comprehensiveness, but a new concentration, a new evangelization, that was demanded by the situation.

But the defective theological education of the ministry seemed to put a great obstacle in the way of such a revival as I have described. For, incredible as it may seem to many, and even alarming, theology was, (for reasons on which it would be ungracious for me to enter,) not only distrusted, but hated by many of the stewards of the Θεοῦ λόγος. And I have longed and prayed to see the man arise to alter all

this, with an equal knowledge of his sin, his Saviour, and his subject, to do the work that had to be done in rearing men with a real, thorough, humble and joyous belief in their own message, and to do it on a scale to compel the attention, and even the concern, of our Churches.

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Meantime my own course seemed prescribed. It was, in the space of life, strength, and work which was yet mine, to labour as one who waited for that messianic hope, and to try to persuade those who would hear to join me in preparation for so great a gift of God. I withdrew my prime attention from much of the scholar's work and gave it to those theological interests, imbibed first from Maurice, and then more mightily through Ritschl, which come nearer to life than science, sentiment, or ethic ever can do. I immersed myself in the Logic of Hegel,¹ and corrected it by the theology of Paul, and its continuity in the Reformation, because I was all the time being corrected and humiliated by the Holy Spirit. To me John Newton's hymn which I spoke of is almost holy writ. My faith in critical methods is unchanged. My acceptance of many of the new results is as it was. This applies to the criticism of traditional dogma no less than of scripture. But the need of the hour, among the only circles I can reach, is not that. The time for it will come, but not yet. It is a slow matter. For what is needed is no mere change of view, but a change and a deepening in the type

¹I desire to own here how very much I owe to Dr. Fairbairn.

286 of personal religion, amounting in cases to a new conversion. There is that amiss with the Churches which free criticism can never cure, and no breadth or freshness of view amend. There is a lack of depth and height, an attenuation of experience, a slackness of grasp, a displacement of the centre, a false realism, a dislocation of perspective, amid which the things that make Christianity permanently Christian are in danger of fading from power, if not from view. In a word, I was driven to a change of front though not of footing—to the preacher's and the pastor's treatment of the situation, which is also the New Testament view, and which is very different from the scholar's. The savant may or must frame results and utter them regardless of their public effect, but the preacher may not. The order of truth he deals with has its own methods, his office has its own paedagogic, and his duty its own conscience. In most cases the best contribution the preacher can make at present to the new theology is to deepen and clear the old faith, and to rescue it from a kind of religion which is only religion and hardly Christian faith. What has often passed as the new theology is no more, sometimes, than a theology of fatigue, or a theology of the press, or a theology of views, or a theology of revolt. Or it is an accommodation theology, a theology accommodated only to the

actual interests of the cultured hour. ² The effort made is to substitute for the old faith something more human in its origin, more humane in its temper, and more halting in its creed, something more genial and more rational and more shallow. It is that rather than the effort to deepen the old theology by a sympathetic re-interpretation, which pierces farther into its content of revelation, and speaks the old faith in a new tongue. The tongue is new enough, but it is not certain that it speaks the old thing, or develops its position from a profounder acquaintance with the holiness of the love of God within the Cross. It analyses the Bible, but it does not reconstruct from the Bible, but from what is known as the Christian principle, which is mainly human nature re-edited and bowdlerised.

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I am sure no new theology can really be theology,

² While I was writing this I read the address of an estimable preacher of up-to-date theology who was demanding that the theologians should come down and accept a theology imposed by three things—physical science, historical study (especially as to the origin of the Bible), and comparative religion. Well, these results are pretty familiar to most of us by now, and very sterile. But you will hardly believe that there was not a word about the study of the Gospel, our application to the contents of Christ's revelation of God, the implicates of his idea of God, or the principles of his work. No, that would have put the preacher beside the theologians. He would have had to ask questions about what was meant by God's most holy love in Christ, questions which no science of nature, history or religion can answer. Our spiritual shyness of God's holiness has more than something to do with the ordinary reaction against theology.

288 whatever its novelty, unless it express and develop the old faith which made those theologies that are now old the mightiest things of the age when they were new. Well do I know how little a theology in itself can do, and how the mighty doer is the living faith. But I know well also that that faith is not the real thing unless it compels and loves an adequate theology; and if it cannot produce it it dies. I know well also how seldom it is really objections to an outworn system that keep men from Christ, and retard the Gospel. I am sure that, if we had a theology brought entirely up to date in regard to current thought, we should not then have the great condition for the Kingdom of God. It is the wills of men, and not their views, that are the great obstacle to the Gospel, and the things most intractable. The power to deal with those wills is the power of the Gospel as the eternal act of the will and heart of God. And the power of the Gospel as a preached thing is shaped in a message which has had from the first a theological language of its own creation as its most adequate vehicle. To discard that language entirely is to maim the utterance of the Gospel. To substitute a vocabulary of mere humane sympathies or notions for the great phrases and thoughts which are theology compressed into diamonds is like the attempt to improve a great historic language, which is a nation's record, treasure and trust, by reducing it to Saxon monosyllables, and these to phonetics. I cannot conceive a Christianity to hold the future without words like grace, sin, judgment, repentance, incarnation, atone-

ment, redemption, justification, sacrifice, faith and eternal life. No words of less volume than these can do justice to the meaning of God, however easy their access to the minds of modern men. It needs such words to act on the scale of God and of the race. And the preacher who sets to discard them or, what is more common, to eviscerate them, is imperilling the great Church for a passing effect with the small. For a living and modern theology our chief need is a living and positive faith, moving in those great categories, and full of confident power to absorb and organize the sound thought of the time. To rouse and feed this faith is the great work of the preacher. And thus the service the preacher does to theology is at least no less than the service theology does to him. A mere theology may strain and stiffen the preacher. But the preacher who is a true steward of the Christian Word makes a living theology inevitable, which, because it lives, demands new form and fitness for each succeeding time.

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In closing his recent admirable *History of New England Theology*, Dr. Frank Hugh Foster says: "The questions of the present hour are more fundamental than those with which New England Theology, or its immediate successors, have had to concern themselves. A ringing call is sounding through the air to face the true issue—the reality of God's supernatural interference in the history of man *versus* the universal reign of unmodified law [or ideas and processes]. The question is not whether the old evangelical scheme needs some adjustments

290 to adapt it to our present knowledge, but whether its most fundamental conception, the very idea of the Gospel is true. Before this all the halfway compromises of the present day must be given up. Men must take sides. They must be for the Gospel or against it."

And for or against a historic Gospel, is what Dr. Foster means