

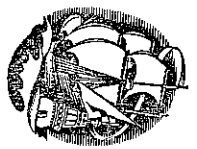
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REVELATION OLD AND NEW

Sermons and Addresses

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THE PLACE OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE IN THE MAKING OF THEOLOGY

(a paper read to the National Council of the Evangelical Free Churches at Birmingham, as reported in *The Christian World Pulpit*, 21st March, 1906.)

MEDIAEVAL Christianity took its stand upon the authority of the Church, the Reformers on the authority of the Bible, and late Protestantism on the authority of the Confessions. The appeal from all these to the godly consciousness of Christendom was inaugurated by the great regenerative genius of modern theology—Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher founded as a theologian upon the religion of Pietism which he inherited. And it is at this stage on the whole that our Free Church communities stand at the present moment. They make their appeal for the truth of Christianity to Christian experience. They do not quite realize how far it is from final.

It was an immense step forward. It was a great contribution to the intimacy and the reality of the Christian life, and to the efficacy of the Christian Church. It was largely associated with the Evangelical movement and with Methodism. It was the saving of vital Christianity in this country at least. It was an indispensable reaction from the formalism, literalism, and confessionalism that had settled down to blight the Church. It was a rediscovery of the treasure buried in the Christian field. It translated the opinionated right of private judgment into the modest duty of personal experience. It tempered the hardness of private judgment, and it furnished the key of Christianity to many whose judgment was but ill equipped. It gave the believer a right to

speak not only on faith but on central theology. It gave him a new and personal interest in theology no less than in faith.

How then is it that in those very circles in the Churches of the Evangelical experience a distaste and a distrust of theology has begun to spread, and in many quarters has gone much farther than that? How is it that the appeal to experience which served the orthodox Methodist so well is now serving equally well the mere humanist, who has no patience with positive Christianity, who swears by spiritual evolution and sneers at Christian doctrine, who refers everything to the native pieties of the heart, of which Christ was the classic case, with the refining and cultivating effect that every classic has? How do we account for that negative phenomenon? And there is a positive. The appeal to experience is being fast replaced by an appeal to the Gospel. The old interest in inspiration gives way to the interest in revelation. What has driven us in that direction? It is the discovery of the weakness of the merely experimental, inspirational basis for either theology or life. Schleiermacher must be corrected by Ritschl.

THE WEAKNESS OF EXPERIMENTALISM

There are many who feel that the Churches most dominated by the experimental method, though they have gained in force, are not gaining to the same extent in the power which sustains the force. They can carry an election with men easier than rest in an election of God. The God of our fathers chose us; ours is a God offered to our choice, and our vote hesitates. The inner certainty is not what it was. The objective security is not what it was. The note of authority is not what it was. The note of humility is not what it was. Faith as it has gained in the matter of experience has lost in the note of obedience. I do not speak of the obedience that flows from faith, but of the obedience which faith itself is, which is the natural feature and seal of faith. We are all for

love as the nature of faith, and not obedience. Faith has gained in personal sincerity, but it has lost in personal humility. It is more vivid, but it is not more reverent. It is more decorous, but it is not more worshipful. The old informality of worship has gone, but is often replaced by the informality of irreverence. Faith is more sympathetic, but is not more awed. It does not betray a soul sanctified so much as consecrated, and often it shows a soul no more than impressed. It responds to the spirit of Christ, but it is not abased before the majesty, the holiness of Christ. Active religion becomes bustling and jaunty religion. It acclaim Christ the King, especially in public matters more than it seems to feel Him pleading in the inner unspeakable soul. It cheers the King's procession more than it inhabits the Saviour's Church. Our type of religion seems to carry the note of experience, I repeat, rather than the note of essential obedience. Our faith is a responsive thrill rather than an absolute submission. It is a self-denial, a self-surrender, a self-mortification, rather than a falling at His feet as one dead and rising at His touch. The old assent of the intellect becomes the new assent of the heart, but it remains assent rather than fealty. The heart acclaim God offener than the will bows. And some seem more enthusiastic about Christ than re-created. They are His vouchers rather than His property. But surely, if there be such a thing as revelation at all, a spontaneous and definite announcement of Himself by God in His grace, our first attitude to it is not mere sympathetic response. We offer that to any hero or genius from among ourselves. Surely it must be, once for all, obedience. Surely faith is an obedience, or it is nothing. If it is everything it is the obedience, from which all else flows. Our first attitude to God's gracious revelation of Himself is not even the sense of liberty. That is secondary. For freedom is not an end in itself. And in the next place it comes to Christians only by their redemption and their practical obedience to it.

FAITH AND DEVOTION

Appeals are made to us not to omit in all our activity to cultivate the spirit of devotion. Appeals of the kind are useless. Devotion which is cultivated to preserve our balance is not devotion. The only devotion worth having is that which is made inevitable by the nature of faith as itself the fountal devotion, an act of obedience far more than a state of experience, a submission to a real objective with a native right and power to rule us from the centre.

In like manner we are familiar with pulpit appeals for more love, more trust, more sympathy, more of the whole gamut of Christian ethic and piety. We are told what Christianity means. It is not presented to us as Christ. I know we are told it is Christ, and we are to imitate Him. But imitation is not obedience. It is rather independence. And even while we are told that Christianity is Christ, the method of the preaching does not correspond to that phrase. "Believe, believe", is the whole tone of many a fruitless preacher. It is bound to be fruitless. It is asking, urging people to lift themselves by their own waistband. It is ignoring the fact that both faith and repentance and all Christian experiences are supernatural things, are the gift of God. Let us cease employing or commanding people in a forcible, feeble way to believe and to love. These things are not at our volition. Let us offer men not appeals but gifts. Let us come with the gift of a real Gospel. Look to the Gospel and it will see to the experiences. Don't beg men to believe in Christ; put before men a Christ that they cannot help believe. It is not so easy. It is easy enough to utter appeals with more or less ardour—I will not say passion. It is easy, though not so easy, to impress men with the spell or fervour of our own enthusiasm, or even our own real experience. But it is not so easy to take home the gift of God to ourselves in Christ that we may carry it to others with its native and exclusive power to stir the love, the trust, the penitence which we try to flog up in

vain. To preach Christ is not to declare our experience of Christ only or chiefly. It is so to study Christ and His Gospel, so to wind ourselves into His slow, yielding secret, that from a problem He becomes a power to us, and we become not only His witnesses, but His sacraments. Propagandists have faith as an ardour, and prophets have it as an insight. But the apostles have it as personal obedience to a personal revelation of a Gospel. And there are more propagandists and prophets than apostles. Little of your preaching lacks religiosity, but some of it does lack religion, which loses the inspiration of the man in the revelation of the message. It has every other grace, but lacks faith.

FAITH AND OBEDIENCE

I fear I am forgetting the text set me by the power here, which I have not only to experience, but to obey. I am speaking about preaching when I am charged to speak about theology. Well, to tell the truth, I find it hard to speak of theology to an audience like this, and in twenty minutes. Strict theology is a matter of lectures more than of addresses. And no lecture is of any use under an hour. But I have not really lost my bearings. When I say that the type of faith which was engrossed with subjective experience is making way for a type which centres in objective obedience, I am saying, in other words, this—that in religion experience comes to the ground if it be not sustained by a theology. I mean more than historic facts. I mean facts which are theological even more than historic. You can have a godly soul without much theology, but you cannot for long have a godly Church. It will become a feeble Church, and then a worldly Church; it will not have grit enough to resist the externalism of the world, its clear definitions and its positive ways. The inner man which really copes with the world is not merely the pious sympathetic man, but the man permeated with the power of an objective Gospel and its facts

and truths. It is our objective base that the formidable critics assail; and we shall never secure our case against them by escaping into the subjective piety of a Christian consciousness. It must be clear that by theology I do not mean something distilled from experience, but something presented, revealed to experience as its source, however condensed or implicit. The theology of experience is one thing—that is Schleiermacher; it is the theology which explicates the Christian consciousness. But the experience of theology is another thing, and it is the experience which explicates the Christian Gospel. And the great movement which arose out of Schleiermacher to correct Schleiermacher, the movement associated with the principle of Ritschl (and going far beyond his system), is the movement to an objective Gospel carrying a theology that does not arise in experience, but only makes its appeal to experience.

SCHLEIERMACHER AND RITSCHL

I said that Schleiermacher had to be corrected by Ritschl. (I am prepared to be accused of throwing about names that have an interest only for the technical theologian, but I should be sorry to come here to do that. These names represent great movements, and movements not confined to Germany, but going on in a subconscious way among us. The difference is that we blunder through our religious life in an agnostic fashion—rude people might call it stupid—as we do with our political, whereas the Germans know where faith is going with clear eyes, and they see it half a century and more before us.) Well, I say Schleiermacher had to be corrected by Ritschl. It is quite true that Ritschl was on the line of Schleiermacher and not of Hegel; he was evangelical and not speculative. But he had to outgrow Schleiermacher, and he had to do so to secure an objective base for both theology and religion. That objective base Hegel found in the nature of thought; but the solvent work of the Tübingen

left, where Ritschl was bred, forbade him that stay. He found the base in history, in a positive act of revelation. From the nettle danger in the Tübingen treatment of the historic Bible he plucked the flower of safety in a historic Gospel. It is one-sided to say that Ritschl's great work was to cast us anew upon Christian experience. He cast us upon the experience of revelation, of an objective, historic, positive Gospel as the soul of the Bible and its reason for being. Schleiermacher said that religion was the sense of dependence. The result of that is mere impressionism; it does not make enough of revelation; it does not make it the first thing. Ritschl moved at least two steps forward and outward. He said faith was an act of judgment—a judgment of our whole man on a certain fact's value, its effect and worth for us, and not on its mere existence. And he further said it was an act of obedience, of total submission corresponding to the absolute nature of the Gospel fact and its demand. A religion of impressionism goes for little; it becomes aesthetic and romantic. A religion of judgment means more; it meets revelation with the assent of satisfaction; it lets volition find us. But volition must bind us; and a religion which is a standing obedience is the most powerful and permanent of all.

AN OBEDIENT EXPERIENCE

What we need is a theology that creates an obedient experience rather than experience that creates an interpretive theology. What is created from Christian experience is theologoumena rather than theology. Of course I understand by any experience which is used as the basis of theology the positively Christian experience of the regenerate man, and not mere experience of the world, or of life, or of the humanist pieties and ideals. But even the positively Christian experience of a quite new life cannot be the basis either of a gospel or of a theology. What can be such a basis is Christ's

experience and that of those in first and direct contact with His person and work. The value of our experience as a base, or even as a test, is small; it is too narrow, it is too variable, it is too impure. The fundamental thing is not experience, but the *à priori* element in experience; the thing of which we have experience; the datum revealed in it and to it; the thing which produces our experience, the object of our faith. Faith is the great thing; and faith is not an experience in the sense of a mood, but as response to a revelation. It is there in great measure to save us from our experiences as subjective states, and to enable us to do without them on occasion, as our Lord did in the world-saving moment of the dereliction on the cross. Besides, some of the greatest convictions of our faith are beyond the range of our possible experience. What can experience tell us of the pre-existence of Christ? What can it tell us of the final victory of Christianity in history, and the consummation of all things in the coming kingdom of God? Can any experience assure us that all things work together for good to love except an experiential faith in the love that has reconciled all things to Himself, and constantly sees in Christ a reconciliation hidden to us? The reconciliation of faith and experience exists but in the object of our faith—the Reconciler. What we need is, not to see a reconciliation by Christ, but to experience heartily Christ as the reconciliation. Again, is Christianity the highest we have come to? Experience says Yes; comparative religion says Yes; the historic-religious method says Yes. But is it the highest we can come to? Is it a final revelation? Is it absolute? To that question what can experience say? But is there any doubt that New Testament Christianity claims to be final and absolute? It does not contemplate the possibility of another and more adequate gospel. Such was the experience of Christ, and, through Him, of the apostles. But was Christ's experience here a mere part (though the highest part) of human experience Godward? The Christian

contention has been that Christ's experience was not man's so much as God's in man. He is a revelation in terms of human experience, but not a revelation of the resources of human experience. We go back to history not only to correct the Christian experience, but to found it, and to give it something to crystallize on. And we have this in the historic Christ, who is now neither debris left by the pyrrhonian critics on the one hand nor a mere part of history on the other, but an eternal reality in history. Christ corresponds in history to the *à priori* element given in individual experience. He is above the relativity of comparative methods. These and such things belong to our faith and not our experience, to the grand venture and not to the verification. Faith, indeed, is experimental or nothing. But we have surely got beyond the error which confuses faith with experience. A faith merely experimental becomes merely empirical, and at last dies of secularity.

THE SENSE OF GUILT

The essential thing is the object of faith, not the subject of the experience. I may have a vivid and varied experience of the rich contents of my justification in Christ. I may exhibit pieties which stir admiration, ardour, and envy. I may even infect others with the glow and be a contagious influence. But all that is not yet the work of an evangelist. What is it all worth for the greatest purposes of the Church, whether in Gospel or theology, if I cannot make clear and irresistible what it is in Christ, and in no other, that lifts us beyond the presumptions or despairs, the pride or the poverty of my experience, rouses personal trust in God's grace, and gives me footing and freedom among all the crises of thought or life? What, I say, is the spiritual worth of my experience if it only speak of itself and do not become the mere channel of the Gospel, or the atmosphere in which it glows? Let us say less about our private experiences and

more about the mind and work of Christ, more of His experience, more of God's experience, opened and conveyed to us in Him. Preach an objective Word, and leave It to handle saint and sinner as it will. Do not, for instance, force the sense of guilt till it become an unconscious hypocrisy. Do not say it is an indispensable condition of coming to Christ effectually and do not therefore hog it up. That is not the only avenue to Christ, though it is a sure result of Christ. It is on the whole more true that Christ brings us to the sense of guilt than that the sense of guilt brings us to Christ. The repentance of the mature Christian is a more precious and Christian thing than the repentance of his callow years. The Baptist bade people repent, the Christ made them repent. He was exalted to give repentance and so remission—not to save us from a repentance otherwise produced.

THE HEART AND THE THEOLOGIAN

If this were an academic address I should have to go into the defects of an experimental basis more deeply; as I should also be more detailed about that value of experience which we all know. I should ruin the sniping of the sharp critics who are lying, like sin, at my door, by covering myself in advance against every shot they will make as I come out. I should try to distinguish between the false and true in the much abused phrase, *pectus fecit theologum*. I should point out in that connection that the *pectus* must be there, because theology is not like philosophy—an academic study. I should go on to say that the *pectus* which is there is far more than heart in the popular sense. And I should enlarge the fact that it means the whole man in relation to God. The man makes the theology. And I should further say in consequence that if a Church has no theology it has no Christian manhood, and no spirit interior, but only a viscous core which may easily become unctuous. I should try to point out that if you make experience the basis of Christian thought or work, you

commend the Church to the world on the strength of what it has gone through instead of what it has believed, and what it has in trust. And to do that would be to make works its hope instead of faith. And it would justify those who refuse Christianity because of the Church's practice instead of its preaching. The Church is a preacher not a saint, and it stands or falls by its Gospel, not its exploits; its word, not its feats. It is not the practice of the Church but the preaching of the Church, its message, not its results, that is the main matter. God help us if the future of Christ in the world depends on the extent to which we realize Him instead of the extent to which we bear witness of Him. What did they of the first generation in Christ rely on who trusted the world to Him before there was any Church history, any marvellous exploits, any sifted experience? I should have to point out how a basis of experience alone lands us in individualism, subjectivism, and romantic temperamental theology. Or, if you say our basis must be the Christian experience not of the individual but of the whole Church, I should have to indicate how that lands us in Catholicism, and a Catholicism which puts not only tradition but the most recent tradition alongside the Bible, and not only alongside it but above it. I should have to show how you cannot, from the experience even of the Church, get anything universal or final, but something more or less eccentric, fantastic, or at most temporal and personal. We know how eccentric and even absurd the views of many saints can be. I should admit, of course, that the truths which matter most are those that appeal to experience, and can be verified there. I should say how valuable, therefore, the miracle of Christ's resurrection is compared with that of His truth. And I should confess how different and how poor my views of the Cross were in my youthful theologizing days till God taught me what sin was and the theology of its cure. But I should try to show that what makes these central is something far beyond experience

—as I have said, no experience can guarantee the final triumph of the cross. It can show its beauty, but it cannot assure its mastery.

AN EDUCATED MINISTRY

But I must leave many points alone in order to touch on two in particular as I close. If experience is an insufficient basis for either Gospel or theology, if the base must be something more objective, then, in the first place, we may be more convinced than ever of the absolute necessity for the Church of an educated ministry. If the burden of our preaching be our experience any fluent and facile religionist may claim his place in the ministry. But if our burden be an objective gospel, which descends on our experience both to kindle and to correct it, then we need that those set apart to be bearers of the Gospel should undergo the discipline of mastering their master, and becoming at home in the nature and history of that which can never be given by any experience, but is given to it.

And in the second place the preachers so educated should withdraw much of their attention not only from their own experience, but from the books, booklets, and prints that contain but the experience of others; and they should bestow themselves upon the serious and resolute study of the Bible in the best and fullest light as the standing creator of Christian experience. They should guard against the fantastic treatment of the Bible which so easily besets the preacher, and they so should devote themselves to the historical, and not to the historical alone, but to its objective spiritual message, equally valid for every age and experience. The Bible is not our standard simply but our source. It is not there to prove doctrine, but to create the faith that produces doctrine. The trophies of a true minister of the Gospel are not only the precious souls he has saved, but they should include his interleaved Greek Testament packed with notes.

It is not the Bible we preach; but what we have to preach is to be found nowhere but in the Bible. And it is hid in that field, which must be bought at much cost and dug with much toil. Do not let us preach our experience, but a Christ and a Gospel familiar to our experience. We preach our experience best when people infer it.

Christianity is nothing if it do not end in experience. But it is also nothing if it only begin there. Experience is its medium and its product, but it is neither its base nor its limit. It is its form, but not its matter. And the experience even of an objective Gospel will fade and die if it remain mere impression and sensibility. It must wake our judgment and compel our obedience. And whatever will do that will change the note of popular religion as well as regenerate unpopular theology. Nothing but some such change can give us the power to sway to God's will the new democracy.

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THE GOODNESS OF GOD

(A College Communion address, as reported in *The British Congregationalist*, 10th August, 1911.)

"The goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance."
ROM. ii. 4.

THE goodness of God is the old way of saying the love of God. Against the Shorter Catechism it is sometimes charged that we hear nothing of love in the definition of God. That is a hasty error. He is "Holiness, Justice, Goodness (that is, Love), and Truth." You will find it borne in on you as you come into real pastoral contact with the sin of the world, and borne in with the more force as your work searches you with revelations about yourself; that repentance is a ground tone of the Christian life. And you will further find that repentance is produced by God's love far more than by His severity. You will, still further, be driven I trust, to find the supreme expression of God's love to be the Cross of Christ; and you will come to rest in the experience that the Cross of Christ is much more than a refuge from the repentance produced by God's holy law—it is the great and constant source of the truest repentance we can know. As the Cross retires from religion it becomes a religion more and more emptied of repentance.

All that law makes is the sorrow of the world, which works death. The age which is now closing is the age which has seen the reign of law established for the natural world as it never was before; and concurrently the favourite type of religion is divested of the sense of sin, or guilt, in an unprecedented way; and this even though the action of law has been traced and pressed deep into the windings of the moral world, and the automatic action of Nemesis in