



Dad, ol' counselor:

Could you kind of look this over, writing in the margins points which are unclear or ones which you disagree with, and then send it on to Mother, so that she could do the same?

I would surely appreciate it!

Christian Theology in New Dimension

When a tender theologian, one preparing for future active service in the Lord's Kingdom, reaches that point in his training which has seen him discover some insight or an answer to a problem with which he has been grappling for some time, he can best mark this point of achievement by setting forth his views in a treatise of this kind. Not only does this written exercise help him to more neatly formulate his own conception, but it enables him to transmit his views to others—wiser, who, if he has erred, serve his cause by pointing to his mistakes or perhaps by leading him on to greater truth.

This theologian has reached this stage of development in his thinking concerning the place of Christian theology in the spiritual life of the believer and the role of faith in the formulation of doctrines of belief.

There has been a problem in this field. To say that it doesn't exist is pure obscurantism. Men for ages have made attempts to set forth the truths of Christianity in systematic form, a formulation in which all parts fit together harmoniously without inner contradiction, yet without complete abstraction. Some have been more successful than others. Thomas Aquinas, for example, constructed a system on the Aristotelian scheme of the universe which has existed for years; it was his to formulate the Thomistic theological system which fit the truths of Christianity into the already existing philosophical world view of Aristotle. Others, less industrious, have endeavored to frame a consistent world view simply upon the basis of Christianity itself, not needing to step outside its bounds to find something onto which to hang Christian doctrine. All however have approached the task from essentially the same point of view. Naturally Christian truth must have Biblical foundations; naturally, these systematicians have read the Bible, deduced spiritual truths from these Scriptural passages, and then as a final phase in constructing a world view entirely in touch with reality, they have attempted to make their derived spiritual truths fit into that current in the philosophic or scientific thought of their day.

But a problem has always existed, a manifold problem. Naturally, when one seeks to construct a world view upon the basis of Scripture, and when this individual sticks unreservedly to a strict literal interpretation of Scripture, he will set forth a system of religious truth set within the context of Hebrew geography and cosmology. This particular individual has failed to realize that that which accompanies God's revelation in Scripture, or that into which the revelation has come, is not of necessity a part of that revelation, and consequently, his world view, while thoroughly Biblical, fails to correspond with the reality people experience day by day. Thomas Aquinas suffered this fate, despite the current labors of the Neo-Thomists. When it was demonstrated that the Aristotelian scheme of things was no longer valid for picturing true reality, then it was only another short step to the demonstration that Thomistic theology was also not in complete accord with reality. This fate has been others'.

So, there have been various alternatives. Some of the usually more-liberal bent (and these are comparatively few in number) have decided to look with open minds upon scientific discovery and welcome any new find as a find which also goes into the make-up of a theological scheme of things. Others intent upon retaining the thought of the days in which it was formulated have consistently repudiated the findings of science, have argued for the superiority of faith over reason, have even declared that man's reason is of the devil; in short, for these, scientific discovery is met only by complete rejection substantiated quite often only by fierce verbal onslaught. Then, there is a third alternative; few are they which find it. This consists of the view that science and religion (and philosophy, or any related subject) can only develop within their own context. A synthesis of the many can never be made for these do not in this direct way concern each other. A conflict cannot occur because each operates within its proper domain, not oblivious to the findings of others, but not either dependent upon the others' discoveries. It is a modified form of this third alternative which comprises this writer's point of departure.

When one thinks of theology as a subject of study, or as a means of obtaining knowledge, he must at the outset determine the area in which that subject will operate. Perhaps one will recounter that all subjects or fields are proper subject-matter for theological inquiry; this would be true in a derivative way. Yet one must admit that there exists a specific theological world in which the 'science' of theology has validity as one inquiring after truth.

Theological inquiry, then, is not essentially concerned with the physical in life, nor with the psychological, nor with the economic, nor the historical, social, nor even with the philosophical. It has its own domain. This domain might be called the realm in which only the heart knows; it might be termed the world in which love is the most powerful force, in which faith (not reason) alone is that which discerns. This must be our underlying assumption!

This writer has often wondered why the most influential Christian people in his spiritual development haven't been the most learned in Christian thought, nor the professional ecclesiologists, nor those well versed in traditional Christian affairs. He has been stimulated greatest spiritually by those simple, humble, God-fearing individuals who have walked that daily walk with Christ, the ones who lacked full and complete knowledge, but not devotion. The writer has also wondered why knowledge seems to hold the upper hand in religious circles and even in preparation for following Christ when it is everywhere apparent that love is that which motivates most strongly and wins most securely.

And he has made a discovery. In his preparation for the ministry he has been subjected to all kinds of rational argument concerning various articles of faith. He has seen men at pains to describe how Christ can be God and thus know all things and at the same time "grow in the wisdom" of God. He has seen men strain in the endeavor to explain how man can be guilty of sin while being born in sin, possessing original sin, with apparently no say in the matter. He has listened to others bungle as they try to reconcile free will with the fact that no one can call Christ Lord but by the Holy Ghost which is that alone

Who performs this function. He has seen various attempts at setting forth the truths of Christianity pass all the criteria for authenticity while at the same time failing to fit harmoniously into a system with the other authentic teachings from the same source. And example after example could be cited.

One might become completely sceptical after a treatment of this kind, for it would not be difficult to assert that if something is to represent a systematic world view, and if that system can be seen to be invalid as a system on various and sundry issues, then the system as a whole is invalid and the truth it supposedly represents is not truth at all but just another bold attempt at truth which has gone awry. Complete scepticism, however, is not the sole answer one can give.

One might go back to the very beginning of construction, and bring truth back into its specifically theological domain. One might even begin with one's life (certainly including its Scriptural base) no matter how much this might horrify the theologians. It is in this domain that love is operative, that faith asks the questions, and that the heart alone knows the answers. And is this impossible? Haven't the greatest moments of one's life been those moments of inner singing, of profound realization of some great experience of truth that not even the mind or the tongue could frame for transmission? And isn't it to this essential root of man that the religious message is directed?

What is the point of this? Well, if religion were a philosophy, then we could submit it to the criteria which judge valid philosophy. If the truths of Christianity were scientific truths, then we could upon the basis of scientific inquiry judge the validity of these truths. If religious experience is psychological in nature, then one can with a certain degree of accuracy derive laws of religion. Systems could validly be constructed in any field of human inquiry, but religious truth (not religion, necessarily) is above systematization; it transcends schemes and rules and laws and eternal patterns.

The heart alone knows, and when the human heart is confronted with God Himself, it has not the audacity, nor the stupidity, nor even the capacity (for why would it?) to ask the question, "Well, do I have the ability to believe in you, or is it true as the theologians state that because I am depraved I must somehow wait until the Holy Spirit works that believing power within me?" No, at a time like this, the heart either answers with an audacious "yes" or it rejects, completely unconscious of the problems of free will. Faith doesn't ask after a moment of supreme religious experience whether or not it accepted or received, whether its function was passive or active; in the realm of the spiritual it can only rejoice in what God hath wrought. Love in the spiritual world does not subject itself to the examination to determine whether or not it might be erotic love, or a bit of agape, or perhaps brotherly love; it sets up no bounds in its response to the eternal but merely anthems "Were the whole realm of nature mine, that would be tribute far too small." The sinner, sensing the love of God focused at the Cross, viewing that God-Man suffering an innocent death, but praying "Father, forgive them, for they know what they do," is overwhelmed with guilt; at a time like this, he completely forgets about the issue of the origin of sin, whether he as one born into sin can be held accountable, and merely falls exhausted before the feet of Christ.

A theological system, valid in all points, is a human impossibility. It is doomed to failure in its very inception, for the truths it seeks to harmonize belong not to its realm, nor are they complete truths. They belong to the divine realm of reality, and are merely revealed to man, not in whole, but only as one is able to perceive them through the mirror darkly. The mind is not a competent tool in the area of religious truth just as the mind is incompetent to understand or set forth the basic tenets of love or of beauty. A system of religious truth can never be organized for it is never known to this extent; systems cannot be built upon partial knowledge.

This is not to suggest, however, that the religious person must shun the acquiring of knowledge or that he should forget about rational systems. Let him study philosophy; let him become immersed in science. But let him not cross the boundaries set up by these respective fields and apply the truths of one to the truths of another. Let him not make his religion a rational philosophy, nor a set of doctrines and traditions. And let him not take a science and make that his religion. Let him honor reason within its domains, but let him recognize other means of appreciating truth. Let him not be as concerned to know as he is concerned to love.

Paul Tillich states that "we would turn down the call of Christ if He called us to the Christian religion or to the Christian doctrines or the Christian morals. We would not accept His claim to be meek and humble and to give rest to our souls, if He gave us new commands for thinking and acting. Jesus is not the creator of another religion, but the victor over religion; He is not the maker of another law, but the conqueror of law. We the ministers and teachers of Christianity do not call you to Christianity but rather to the New Being in Christ to which Christianity should be a witness and nothing else. We do not confuse Christianity with that New Being. Forget your Christian doctrines; forget your own certainties and your own doubts, when you hear the call of Jesus. Forget all Christian morals, your achievements and your failures, when you come to Him. Nothing is demanded of you--- no idea of God, and no goodness in yourselves, not your being religious, not your being Christian, not your being wise, and not your being moral. But what is demanded is only your being open and willing to accept what is given to you, the New Being in Christ, the being of love, as it is manifest in Him whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light."

"Do not ask in the moment of call what you shall do and how action shall follow. It would not be worthwhile to teach Christianity, if it were for the sake of Christianity. Jesus is the Christ not because He brought a new religion, but because He is the end of religion. We spread His call because it is the call to every man in every period to receive the New Being, that hidden saving power in our existence, which takes from us labor and burden, and gives rest to our souls. Do not ask how action shall follow; for you do not ask how the good fruits follow from the goodness of a tree. They follow; action follows being, and new action better action, strong action, follows new being, better being, stronger being. We and our world would be better, truer, and more just if there were more rest for souls in our world---"Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Our actions would be more creative, more conquering, conquering the tragedy of our time, if they grew out of a more profound level of our life. For our creative depth (the domain of religious truth) is the depth in which we are quiet."

Two final considerations must be set forth in conclusion: First of all, salvation by Christ and into Christ is never something that has happened and then is over; it comes not only once in a sinner's life, as a once-for-all matter. Rather, salvation is in process, it is rooted in daily life in a space-time continuum, just as that historical event was not something that existed only in the heavens, or only in abstraction. The sinner is termed a saint because of the gracious declaration of God when Christ has been received; the sinner is all of the time in the process of becoming the saint or the Christian. Salvation is a power of God each day, for God is not One Who created (the universe and new hearts) and then left the scene, His job completed, to let these progress on by their own inertia. God reveals Himself in time, in the process of man's daily living.

Therefore, these times of divine revelation, or when that revelation has been received, become the supreme religious moments in the realm of the Spirit where love is operative, where faith is the means of knowing, and where the heart reigns supreme. These times become the religious "Bethels"---those places where the believer has erected a shrine to mark a significant point which consisted in God's breaking into his own life in some meaningful and realizable way. Naturally, these must be more than subjective experiences; they must have objective reality, but the spirit of man witnesses together with the Spirit of God that what has happened is of divine origin.

The life of the believer is then a walk down life's highway. The people of God are a people on the march, progressing onward down the God-selected highway. Their walk is never pictured as an easy thing; rather it is full of points of temptation and conflict; dangers continually exist on all sides. But these very dangers, these very crises, these very conflicts present the opportunity repeatedly for God to rush into the human life, to show him that his present level of living is not yet coincidental with the level possible, to enable him to grow in the Kingdom of God. If there were no conflicts, there would not be growth. If there were no crises, there would be no opportunities for the realization of the closer conformity to the image of Christ that is necessary if man is to be the man above humanity, the man growing, pressing on, moving towards life as it was originally meant to be. But the walk of the believer, while including crisis points, is the godly walk. It is the walk which results from following Christ. Brother clasps the hand with brother. Grandmother walks in stride with grandchild. Joe, the plumber's helper, is of equal rank with Reverend, the doctor of theology. All are alike, for all have been given the designation, "Children of the Heavenly Father." All walk the same road. All have been attentive to the voice in the heart; all have lived within that realm in which faith is operative. All have been shown that love is of the essence, for love is of God: God is Love!

"These are the ones who have come out of the great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. They are before the throne of God; and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne shall be their Shepherd; he shall lead them unto living fountains of water: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes."

In conclusion, Salvation by Christ is never something that has ended; it comes not once in a sinner's life, as a once-for-all matter. Rather, salvation is in process, just as a sinner is termed a saint because of the gracious declaration of God but is all of the time in the process of becoming the saint or the Christian. The path which is followed is the pathway of conflict and crisis. But God also is not One who spoke once for all, Who merely created the world and man then let these proceed on each's own inertia. God reveals Himself in time, in the process of man's daily life. These times of divine revelation become the believer's Bethels, the places where shrines have been erected to mark a significant point in man's human journey, the place at which God spoke. Important it is for man to know God by first-hand experience, as the Spirit of the Living God breaks into a human life during a time of conflict and makes Himself known. The people of God in the Bible are pictured continually as a people on the march, progressing onward down the God-selected highway. Their walk is never depicted as an easy thing; rather it is full of points of crisis; dangers continually exist on all sides. But it is a godly walk, a walk following Christ, a walk on the Road of the Conqueror: "Who are these which are arrayed in white robes, and whence came they? These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. They are before the throne of God; and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of water: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes."

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