

Christianity & Liberalism

by

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Chapter 3

“God & Man”

It has been observed in the last chapter that Christianity is based on an account of something that happened in the first century of our era. But before that account can be received, certain presuppositions must be accepted. The Christian gospel consists in an account of how God saved man, and before that gospel can be understood something must be known (1) about God and (2) about man. The doctrine of God and the doctrine of man are the two great presuppositions of the gospel. With regard to these presuppositions, as with regard to the gospel itself, modern liberalism is diametrically opposed to Christianity.

It is opposed to Christianity, in the first place, in its conception of God. But at this point we are met with a particularly insistent form of that objection to doctrinal matters which has already been considered. It is unnecessary, we are told, to have a “conception” of God; theology, or the knowledge of God, it is said, is the death of religion; we should not seek to know God, but should merely feel His presence.

With regard to this objection, it ought to be observed that if religion consists merely in feeling the presence of God, it is devoid of any moral quality whatever. Pure feeling, if there be such a thing, is non-moral. What makes affection for a human friend, for example, such an ennobling thing is the knowledge which we possess of the character of our friend. Human affection, apparently so simple, is really just bristling with dogma. It depends upon a host of observations treasured up in the mind with regard to the character of our friends. But if human affection is thus really dependent upon knowledge, why should it be otherwise with that supreme personal relationship which is at the basis of religion? Why should we be indignant about slanders directed against a human friend, while at the same time we are patient about the basest slanders directed against our God? Certainly it

does make the greatest possible difference what we think about God; the knowledge of God is the very basis of religion.

How, then, shall God be known; how shall we become so acquainted with Him that personal fellowship may become possible? Some liberal preachers would say that we become acquainted with God only through Jesus. That assertion has an appearance of loyalty to our Lord, but in reality it is highly derogatory to Him. For Jesus Himself plainly recognized the validity of other ways of knowing God, and to reject those other ways is to reject the things that lay at the very center of Jesus' life. Jesus plainly found God's hand in nature; the lilies of the field revealed to Him the weaving of God. He found God also in the moral law; the law written in the hearts of men was God's law, which revealed His righteousness. Finally Jesus plainly found God revealed in the Scriptures. How profound was our Lord's use of the words of prophets and psalmists! To say that such revelation of God was invalid, or is useless to us today, is to do despite to things that lay closest to Jesus' mind and heart.

But, as a matter of fact, when men say that we know God only as He is revealed in Jesus, they are denying all real knowledge of God whatever. For unless there be some idea of God independent of Jesus, the ascription of deity to Jesus has no meaning. To say, "Jesus is God," is meaningless unless the word "God" has an antecedent meaning attached to it. And the attaching of a meaning to the word "God" is accomplished by the means which have just been mentioned. We are not forgetting the words of Jesus in the Gospel of John, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." But these words do not mean that if a man had never known what the word "God" means, he could come to attach an idea to that word merely by his knowledge of Jesus' character. On the contrary, the disciples to whom Jesus was speaking had already a very definite conception of God; a knowledge of the one supreme Person was presupposed in all that Jesus said. But the disciples desired not only a knowledge of God but also intimate, personal contact. And that came through their discipleship with Jesus. Jesus revealed, in a wonderfully intimate way, the character of God, but such revelation obtained its true significance only on the basis both of the Old Testament heritage and of Jesus' own teaching. Rational theism, the knowledge of one Supreme Person, Maker and active Ruler of the world, is at the very root of Christianity.

But, the modern preacher will say, it is incongruous to attribute to Jesus an acceptance of "rational theism"; Jesus had a practical, not a theoretical, knowledge of God. There is a sense in which these words are true. Certainly no part of Jesus' knowledge of God was merely theoretical; everything that Jesus knew about God touched His heart and determined His actions. In that sense, Jesus' knowledge of God was "practical." But unfortunately that is not the sense in which the assertion

of modern liberalism is meant. What is frequently meant by a “practical” knowledge of God in modern parlance is not a theoretical knowledge of God that is also practical, but a practical knowledge which is not theoretical -in other words, a knowledge which gives no information about objective reality, a knowledge which is no knowledge at all. And nothing could possibly be more unlike the religion of Jesus than that. The relation of Jesus to His heavenly Father was not a relation to a vague and impersonal goodness, it was not a relation which merely clothed itself in symbolic, personal form. On the contrary, it was a relation to a real Person, whose existence was just as definite and just as much a subject of theoretic knowledge as the existence of the lilies of the field that God had clothed. The very basis of the religion of Jesus was a triumphant belief in the real existence of a personal God.

And without that belief no type of religion can rightly appeal to Jesus today. Jesus was a theist, and rational theism is at the basis of Christianity. Jesus did not, indeed, support His theism by argument; He did not provide in advance answers to the Kantian attack upon the theistic proofs. But that means not that He was indifferent to the belief which is the logical result of those proofs, but that the belief stood so firm, both to Him and to His hearers, that in His teaching it is always presupposed. So today it is not necessary for all Christians to analyze the logical basis of their belief in God; the human mind has a wonderful faculty for the condensation of perfectly valid arguments, and what seems like an instinctive belief may turn out to be the result of many logical steps. Or, rather it may be that the belief in a personal God is the result of a primitive revelation, and that the theistic proofs are only the logical confirmation of what was originally arrived at by a different means. At any rate, the logical confirmation of the belief in God is a vital concern to the Christian; at this point as at many others religion and philosophy are connected in the most intimate possible way. True religion can make no peace with a false philosophy, any more than with a science that is falsely so-called; a thing cannot possibly be true in religion and false in philosophy or in science. All methods of arriving at truth, if they be valid methods, will arrive at a harmonious result. Certainly the atheistic or agnostic Christianity which sometimes goes under the name of a “practical” religion is no Christianity at all. At the very root of Christianity is the belief in the real existence of a personal God.

Strangely enough, at the very time when modern liberalism is decrying the theistic proofs, and taking refuge in a “practical” knowledge which shall somehow be independent of scientifically or philosophically ascertained facts, the liberal preacher loves to use one designation of God which is nothing if not theistic; he loves to speak of God as “Father.” The term certainly has the merit of ascribing personality to God. By some of those who use it, indeed, it is not seriously meant;

by some it is employed because it is useful, not because it is true. But not all liberals are able to make the subtle distinction between theoretic judgments and judgments of value; some liberals, though perhaps a decreasing number, are true believers in a personal God. And such men are able to think of God truly as a Father.

The term presents a very lofty conception of God. It is not indeed exclusively Christian; the term "Father" has been applied to God outside of Christianity. It appears, for example, in the widespread belief in an "All-Father," which prevails among many races even in company with polytheism; it appears here and there in the Old Testament, and in pre-Christian Jewish writings subsequent to the Old Testament period. Such occurrences of the term are by no means devoid of significance. The Old Testament usage, in particular, is a worthy precursor of our Lord's teaching; for although in the Old Testament the word "Father" ordinarily designates God in relation not to the individual, but to the nation or to the king, yet the individual Israelite, because of his part in the chosen people, felt himself to be in a peculiarly intimate relation to the covenant God. But despite this anticipation of the teaching of our Lord, Jesus brought such an incomparable enrichment of the usage of the term, that it is a correct instinct which regards the thought of God as Father as something characteristically Christian.

Modern men have been so much impressed with this element in Jesus' teaching that they have sometimes been inclined to regard it as the very sum and substance of our religion. We are not interested, they say, in many things for which men formerly gave their lives; we are not interested in the theology of the creeds; we are not interested in the doctrines of sin and salvation; we are not interested in atonement through the blood of Christ: enough for us is the simple truth of the fatherhood of God and its corollary, the brotherhood of man. We may not be very orthodox in the theological sense, they continue, but of course you will recognize us as Christians because we accept Jesus' teaching as to the Father God.

It is very strange how intelligent persons can speak in this way. It is very strange how those who accept only the universal fatherhood of God as the sum and substance of religion can regard themselves as Christians or can appeal to Jesus of Nazareth. For the plain fact is that this modern doctrine of the universal fatherhood of God formed no part whatever of Jesus' teaching. Where is it that Jesus may be supposed to have taught the universal fatherhood of God? Certainly it is not in the parable of the Prodigal Son. For in the first place, the publicans and sinners whose acceptance by Jesus formed the occasion both of the Pharisees' objection and of Jesus' answer to them by means of the parable, were not any men anywhere, but were members of the chosen people and as such might be designated as sons of God. In the second place, a parable is certainly not to be pressed in

its details. So here because the joy of the father in the parable is like the joy of God when a sinner receives salvation at Jesus' hand, it does not follow that the relation which God sustains to still unrepentant sinners is that of a Father to his children. Where else, then, can the universal fatherhood of God be found? Surely not in the Sermon on the Mount; for throughout the Sermon on the Mount those who can call God Father are distinguished in the most emphatic way from the great world of the Gentiles outside. One passage in the discourse has indeed been urged in support of the modern doctrine: "But I say unto you, love your enemies and pray for them that persecute you; that ye may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He maketh His sun to rise on evil and good and sendeth rain on just and unjust" (Matt. v. 44, 45). But the passage certainly will not bear the weight which is hung upon it. God is indeed represented here as caring for all men whether evil or good, but He is certainly not called the Father of all. Indeed it might almost be said that the point of the passage depends on the fact that He is not the Father of all. He cares even for those who are not His children but His enemies; so His children, Jesus' disciples, ought to imitate Him by loving even those who are not their brethren but their persecutors. The modern doctrine of the universal fatherhood of God is not to be found in the teaching of Jesus.

And it is not to be found in the New Testament. The whole New Testament and Jesus Himself do indeed represent God as standing in a relation to all men, whether Christians or not, which is analogous to that in which a father stands to his children. He is the Author of the being of all, and as such might well be called the Father of all. He cares for all, and for that reason also might be called the Father of all. Here and there the figure of fatherhood seems to be used to designate this broader relationship which God sustains to all men or even to all created beings. So in an isolated passage in Hebrews, God is spoken of as the "Father of spirits" (Heb. xii. 9). Here perhaps it is the relation of God, as creator, to the personal beings whom He has created which is in view. One of the clearest instances of the broader use of the figure of fatherhood is found in the speech of Paul at Athens, Acts xvii. 28: "For we are also His offspring." Here it is plainly the relation in which God stands to all men, whether Christians or not, which is in mind. But the words form part of an hexameter line and are taken from a pagan poet; they are not represented as part of the gospel, but merely as belonging to the common meeting-ground which Paul discovered in speaking to his pagan hearers. This passage is only typical of what appears, with respect to a universal fatherhood of God, in the New Testament as a whole. Something analogous to a universal fatherhood of God is taught in the New Testament. Here and there the terminology of fatherhood and sonship is even used to describe this general relationship. But such instances are extremely rare. Ordinarily the lofty term "Father" is

used to describe a relationship of a far more intimate kind, the relationship in which God stands to the company of the redeemed.

The modern doctrine of the universal fatherhood of God, then, which is being celebrated as “the essence of Christianity,” really belongs at best only to that vague natural religion which forms the presupposition which the Christian preacher can use when the gospel is to be proclaimed; and when it is regarded as a reassuring, all-sufficient thing, it comes into direct opposition to the New Testament. The gospel itself refers to something entirely different; the really distinctive New Testament teaching about the fatherhood of God concerns only those who have been brought into the household of faith.

There is nothing narrow about such teaching; for the door of the household of faith is open wide to all. That door is the “new and living way” which Jesus opened by His blood. And if we really love our fellow men, we shall not go about the world, with the liberal preacher, trying to make men satisfied with the coldness of a vague natural religion. But by the preaching of the gospel we shall invite them into the warmth and joy of the house of God. Christianity offers men all that is offered by the modern liberal teaching about the universal fatherhood of God; but it is Christianity only because it offers also infinitely more.

But the liberal conception of God differs even more fundamentally from the Christian view than in the different circle of ideas connected with the terminology of fatherhood. The truth is that liberalism has lost sight of the very center and core of the Christian teaching. In the Christian view of God as set forth in the Bible, there are many elements. But one attribute of God is absolutely fundamental in the Bible; one attribute is absolutely necessary in order to render intelligible all the rest. That attribute is the awful transcendence of God. From beginning to end the Bible is concerned to set forth the awful gulf that separates the creature from the Creator. It is true, indeed, that according to the Bible God is immanent in the world. Not a sparrow falls to the ground without Him. But he is immanent in the world not because He is identified with the world, but because He is the free Creator and Upholder of it. Between the creature and the Creator a great gulf is fixed.

In modern liberalism, on the other hand, this sharp distinction between God and the world is broken down, and the name “God” is applied to the mighty world process itself. We find ourselves in the midst of a mighty process, which manifests itself in the indefinitely small and in the indefinitely great—in the infinitesimal life which is revealed through the microscope and in the vast movements of the heavenly spheres. To this world-process, of which we ourselves form a part, we apply the dread name of “God.” God, therefore, it is said in effect, is not a person distinct from ourselves; on the contrary our life is a part of His. Thus the

Gospel story of the Incarnation, according to modern liberalism, is sometimes thought of as a symbol of the general truth that man at his best is one with God.

It is strange how such a representation can be regarded as anything new, for as a matter of fact, pantheism is a very ancient phenomenon. It has always been with us, to blight the religious life of man. And modern liberalism, even when it is not consistently pantheistic, is at any rate pantheizing. It tends everywhere to break down the separateness between God and the world, and the sharp personal distinction between God and man. Even the sin of man on this view ought logically to be regarded as part of the life of God. Very different is the living and holy God of the Bible and of Christian faith.

Christianity differs from liberalism, then, in the first place, in its conception of God. But it also differs in its conception of man.

Modern liberalism has lost all sense of the gulf that separates the creature from the Creator; its doctrine of man follows naturally from its doctrine of God. But it is not only the creature limitations of mankind which are denied. Even more important is another difference. According to the Bible, man is a sinner under the just condemnation of God; according to modern liberalism, there is really no such thing as sin. At the very root of the modern liberal movement is the loss of the consciousness of sin.

The consciousness of sin was formerly the starting-point of all preaching; but today it is gone. Characteristic of the modern age, above all else, is a supreme confidence in human goodness; the religious literature of the day is redolent of that confidence. Get beneath the rough exterior of men, we are told, and we shall discover enough self-sacrifice to found upon it the hope of society; the world's evil, it is said, can be overcome with the world's good; no help is needed from outside the world.

What has produced this satisfaction with human goodness? What has become of the consciousness of sin? The consciousness of sin has certainly been lost. But what has removed it from the hearts of men?

In the first place, the war has perhaps had something to do with the change. In time of war, our attention is called so exclusively to the sins of other people that we are sometimes inclined to forget our own sins. Attention to the sins of other people is, indeed, sometimes necessary. It is quite right to be indignant against any oppression of the weak which is being carried on by the strong. But such a habit of mind, if made permanent, if carried over into the days of peace, has its dangers. It joins forces* with the collectivism of the modern state to obscure the individual, personal character of guilt. If John Smith beats his wife nowadays, no

* For what follows, see "The Church In the War," in *The Presbyterian* for May 29, 1919, pp. 10f.

one is so old-fashioned as to blame John Smith for it. On the contrary, it is said, John Smith is evidently the victim of some more of that Bolshevistic propaganda; Congress ought to be called in extra session in order to take up the case of John Smith in an alien and sedition law.

But the loss of the consciousness of sin is far deeper than the war; it has its roots in a mighty spiritual process which has been active during the past seventy-five years. Like other great movements, that process has come silently—so silently that its results have been achieved before the plain man was even aware of what was taking place. Nevertheless, despite all superficial continuity, a remarkable change has come about within the last seventy-five years. The change is nothing less than the substitution of paganism for Christianity as the dominant view of life. Seventy-five years ago, Western civilization, despite inconsistencies, was still predominantly Christian; today it is predominantly pagan.

In speaking of “paganism,” we are not using a term of reproach. Ancient Greece was pagan, but it was glorious, and the modern world has not even begun to equal its achievements. What, then, is paganism? The answer is not really difficult. Paganism is that view of life which finds the highest goal of human existence in the healthy and harmonious and joyous development of existing human faculties. Very different is the Christian ideal. Paganism is optimistic with regard to unaided human nature’ whereas Christianity is the religion of the broken heart.

In saying that Christianity is the religion of the broken heart, we do not mean that Christianity ends with the broken heart; we do not mean that the characteristic Christian attitude is a continual beating on the breast or a continual crying of “Woe is me.” Nothing could be further from the fact. On the contrary, Christianity means that sin is faced once for all, and then is cast, by the grace of God, forever into the depths of the sea. The trouble with the paganism of ancient Greece, as with the paganism of modern times, was not in the superstructure, which was glorious, but in the foundation, which was rotten. There was always something to be covered up; the enthusiasm of the architect was maintained only by ignoring the disturbing fact of sin. In Christianity, on the other hand, nothing needs to be covered up. The fact of sin is faced squarely once for all, and is dealt with by the grace of God. But then, after sin has been removed by the grace of God, the Christian can proceed to develop joyously every faculty that God has given him. Such is the higher Christian humanism—a humanism founded not upon human pride but upon divine grace.

But although Christianity does not end with the broken heart, it does begin with the broken heart; it begins with the consciousness of sin. Without the consciousness of sin, the whole of the gospel will seem to be an idle tale. But how can the consciousness of sin be revived? Something no doubt can be accom-

plished by the proclamation of the law of God, for the law reveals transgressions. The whole of the law, moreover, should be proclaimed. It will hardly be wise to adopt the suggestion (recently offered among many suggestions as to the ways in which we shall have to modify our message in order to retain the allegiance of the returning soldiers) that we must stop treating the little sins as though they were big sins. That suggestion means apparently that we must not worry too much about the little sins, but must let them remain unmolested.

With regard to such an expedient, it may perhaps be suggested that in the moral battle we are fighting against a very resourceful enemy, who does not reveal the position of his guns by desultory artillery action when he plans a great attack. In the moral battle, as in the Great European War, the quiet sectors are usually the most dangerous. It is through the “little sins” that Satan gains an entrance into our lives. Probably, therefore, it will be prudent to watch all sectors of the front and lose no time about introducing the unity of command.

But if the consciousness of sin is to be produced, the law of God must be proclaimed in the lives of Christian people as well as in word. It is quite useless for the preacher to breathe out fire and brimstone from the pulpit, if at the same time the occupants of the pews go on taking sin very lightly and being content with the moral standards of the world. The rank and file of the Church must do their part in so proclaiming the law of God by their lives that the secrets of men’s hearts shall be revealed.

All these things, however, are in themselves quite insufficient to produce the consciousness of sin. The more one observes the condition of the Church, the more one feels obliged to confess that the conviction of sin is a great mystery which can be produced only by the Spirit of God. Proclamation of the law, in word and in deed, can prepare for the experience, but the experience itself comes from God. When a man has that experience, when a man comes under the conviction of sin, his whole attitude toward life is transformed; he wonders at his former blindness, and the message of the gospel, which formerly seemed to be an idle tale, becomes now instinct with light. But it is God alone who can produce the change.

Only, let us not try to do without the Spirit of God.

The fundamental fault of the modern Church is that she is busily engaged in an absolutely impossible task—she is busily engaged in calling the righteous to repentance. Modern preachers are trying to bring men into the Church without requiring them to relinquish their pride; they are trying to help men avoid the conviction of sin. The preacher gets up into the pulpit, opens the Bible, and addresses the congregation somewhat as follows: “You people are very good,” he says; “you respond to every appeal that looks toward the welfare of the communi-

ty. Now we have in the Bible—especially in the life of Jesus— something so good that we believe it is good enough even for you good people.” Such is modern preaching. It is heard every Sunday in thousands of pulpits. But it is entirely futile. Even our Lord did not call the righteous to repentance, and probably we shall be no more successful than He.