

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

ARTICLE VII.

THEOLOGY IN TERMS OF PERSONAL
RELATION.

BY PROFESSOR HENRY CHURCHILL KING, D.D.

IF it is true, as Professor Clarke says, that "religion is the reality of which theology is the study," and if religion is a personal relation of man to God,—then it would seem that an adequate theology must be stated in personal terms. The writer cannot doubt that religion is best conceived as a personal relation, and he certainly holds that theology is best defined as simply a thoughtful and unified expression of what religion means to us. He is bound, therefore, to affirm that theology must be stated in terms of personal relation. It is to the defense and illustration of this proposition that the present article is devoted.

The very name, Christian, which we take upon us, as best characterizing what seems to us most essential in the spirit which we are to show, implies that we know that all life is changed for us by a single personal relation. To trace out in all its implications the full significance of that relation for our entire being is the sole business of theology.

Some recognition of this intensely personal relation of the themes of theology, doubtless, there has always been; but theology has not been able to avoid the great common danger of all speculative thinking—the danger of abstraction, and has consequently too often lost quite out of sight the rich concrete personal relations in a maze of metaphysical abstractions. It is well worth while, therefore, consciously and of set purpose to attempt a statement of the-

ology in strictly personal terms—to demand of ourselves that we keep constantly in mind the meaning of personal relations.

This would only be carrying out what is fairly involved in the demand which Dr. Fairchild laid upon himself in the preface to his "Elements of Theology: "The controlling thought in the mind of the author, the organic principle in the system of doctrine presented, is the recognition of the distinct and complete personality of God, and a like personality of man." Very likely many readers of that preface saw little in this sentence, and said to themselves: Is that not what every theologian does as a matter of course? Unfortunately it is not. Indeed, the trend in theology towards impersonal forms of statement has been so strong, that, even for a man who felt earnestly the personal nature of the problems, a thoroughly consistent statement of theological doctrines in personal terms has been exceedingly difficult. Professor Clarke, for example, in his deservedly popular "Outline of Christian Theology," when dealing with the heart of the Christian faith, similarly says: "The intensely personal nature of this reconciliation has not here been overstated; scarcely, indeed, can it be represented in too strong a light. . . . The reconciliation is not a matter of relation to law or government; it is primarily and essentially a matter of the relation between persons, God and men. . . . It is the personal relation that needs to be set right, and it is through being right with God that men are to be made right with the government of God." And Herrmann even more comprehensively and concisely says: "In its commencement and in all its development alike, Christian faith is nothing else than trust in persons and in the powers of personal life." One may believe thoroughly in these statements of Clarke and Herrmann, and regard them as no doubt forming a kind of ideal for both men, and yet question whether either always

keeps entirely true to this personal conception of the theological problem.

Any one, indeed, who has himself passed through a transition in his conception of theological problems, and who lives in a generation so distinctly transitional as this generation has been, must find it difficult to avoid the transitional in his forms of statement or even of conception, and, in spite of himself, will repeatedly find himself falling back into what is really inconsistent with his highest point of view. But if, as many things seem to indicate, we are on the eve of a new constructive period in theology, which shall organize, even more completely than any of the admirable statements already made, the different lines of progress of our time, can we not be sure that the dominant word in that new construction will be—not evolution, not historical, not critical, not social, not ethical even, but broader than any one of these and including all—personal?

Many considerations certainly urge us to such an attempt at a strictly personal interpretation of theological problems.

In the first place, the very fact, assumed at the start, that religion is a personal relation of man to God, at once provokes such an attempt. We cannot help feeling, that, if we could adequately conceive that personal relation, we should be far on the road to the solution of all our questions in theology. Any earnest effort here, however, makes it clear that the relation to God, though strictly personal, has a special significance. In three respects the relation to God is unique: 1st. Conviction of the love of God, as of no other, seems really necessarily implied in all rational thinking and rational living; it is the fundamental conviction which we only try to express in the so-called ontological argument for the existence of God. 2d. God is himself the source of the moral constitution of men, and therefore speaks personally in it, as no other person does. 3d. Any true personal relation to God must mean the sharing

of his life of self-giving; and this takes one at once into right personal relations to all others. In all these respects, the personal relation to God has then *universal* implications, true in the same degree of no other, and it cannot be interpreted sentimentally. But this only means, that the relation to God is more significant; it is not less personal. Indeed, one must go on to say, the relation to God is the most completely personal of all relations, in just so far as God alone is perfectly personal. Only God, moreover, can completely satisfy either the instinct of self-devotion or the insatiable thirst for love. And only God knows us altogether and every avenue of approach to the soul, and can therefore come into most intimate communion with us. It is from God alone that we are not isolate in much of our life. But if these things are so, it is evident that any adequate theology must be saturated with a deep sense of the meaning of the personal.

Moreover, if one chose to start from the metaphysical side, he is confronted, as never before, with three facts which show that our ultimate philosophical solutions are everywhere tending to the personal: (1) the collapse of materialism; (2) the predominance of idealistic or spiritualistic views in philosophy; (3) the growing acceptance of the teleological view of essence. It is no accidental result that, within our own time, materialism has ceased to exist as a philosophical theory. On all hands, moreover, it seems to be increasingly recognized, that, if we are ever to understand the world, the key must be, as Leibnitz thought it, in ourselves. Accordingly, in spite of the vast increase in our knowledge of the material universe, our philosophies are more and more either idealistic or spiritualistic, holding either, that only minds exist, or, that all that does exist is of the nature of mind. Both views assert alike that at least we know best and most directly spirit, and seem likely to come to affirm, with Paulsen, that here,

in our own inner life, we know the essence of reality, and that "the distinction made between a phenomenon and a thing in itself has absolutely no meaning here." All this means that, ultimately, all relations are personal or in the line of the personal.

So, too, the growing tendency to define essence (in the sense of that which distinguishes one being from another, not that which is common to all beings) in terms of purpose, is a distinct tendency towards definition in personal terms. The recognition that we can speak of the essential quality of a thing only in view of the purpose we cherish concerning it, is becoming well-nigh universal among philosophical writers. What one will call the essential quality of paper, e.g., depends upon the use he wishes to make of it. Ultimately, this teleological view of essence must bring us to a new metaphysics, in which the real essence of each thing must be defined in terms of the full divine purpose in bringing this thing into being. All that God meant it to be, the full part which he meant it to play,—that is the only adequate definition of the essence of anything. And this teleological view of essence, now rightly prevailing in philosophy, has a significance for theology which we are but slowly recognizing.

Even an adequate metaphysics then seems, ultimately, everywhere to drive us to attempt a theology in personal terms.

But if this present distinct trend in philosophy towards the personal is justified, it really implies that we know spirit, personal life, better than anything else; that, for our generation at least, personal relations are really clearer than any of the analogies from other things by which we have tried to make them clear. And from whatever realm we draw those analogies,—whether from human institutions or from the evolution of lower nature,—we can know beforehand that the analogies must prove inadequate and in

part misleading. The personal reality is greater than any of its illustrations. Many have come to see that this is true of all legal and governmental analogies, who do not see that it is just as true of evolution analogies. But, though one fully accepts the evolution theory, as the writer does, yet he must see that the present tendency to state theology in terms of animal evolution, while justified and helpful in our generation it may be, is certainly a transient phase of theology. For, any adequate view of evolution must include man, and with man we have reached the stage of persons and personal relations, and the dominant laws must be those of personal relation, not those of the lower animal evolution. The analogy of the organism, therefore, as well as the analogy from human institutions, is certain to fail us at the most vital points. The first and foremost, the constant, the last, and the greatest study of the theologian must be of persons and of personal relations; nothing else will avail him in his deepest problems. And if he will really face the facts, he will come to see that the personal lies closer at hand, is more real and more clear to him, than anything else.

It is quite in harmony with the philosophic trend and the new clearness of the personal, that we should believe that we can see that, in the main, the development of the race has been steadily toward a deeper sense of the value and sacredness of the person; that every step in moral advance has meant a deepening of this sense; and that the highest test of a civilization or of a man is to be found in this same sense of the value and the sacredness of the person. This sensitiveness as to the personal, in spite of some annoying counter-currents, seems, beyond doubt, stronger in our age than ever before. And I have elsewhere¹ tried to show that all the distinctly moral and spiritual influences of our day on theology may be grouped under the

¹ *American Journal of Theology*, April, 1899.

two heads of this deepening sense of the value and sacredness of the person, and the growing recognition of Christ as the supreme person. Certain it is, that the modern emphases in theology,—Christian, biblical, historical, practical, ethical, social,—all expressly call for a deepening of the conception of the personal. Now let one take in even superficially the significance of these statements, and he must feel that no theology can meet the needs of our time, or the demands of truth, which does not insist on bringing every problem up to its ultimate solution in personal terms.

We are brought to the same inference, when we take into account one of the great contentions of modern psychology—its insistence on the unity of man. The whole man, it maintains, acts in all. Again and again in the history of man has it been necessary to renew this protest in the interests of the whole man, against the abstractions and one-sidedness of a “false psychologism.” Even thought, emotion, and will cannot be adequately treated in abstraction from each other. I quite agree with Mellone, that it should be a fundamental contention in philosophy, that “no one of these three can be opposed to the others; human existence or experiences cannot be interpreted in terms of one of these unless the others are made of equal importance with that one. . . . We do not correct ‘intellectualism’ by opposing emotion and will to thought—assuming that reality is found in them *more* than in thought, and that we are before all things active and feeling beings; nor by regarding our nature as a mere combination of the three, as a rope may be of three strands; but by regarding even our deepest knowledge of these three (in their distinction and relation) as itself only symbolic and partially true; so that the three functions become three *inseparable* and equally complete symbols of what man verily is.” And if we take real account thus of the entire man, we get a double, not a single, test of truth—logical consistency *and*

worth. Reality must meet the test of the whole man. Now this psychological and philosophical insistence upon the entire personality leads us directly to our main thesis in theology. "The whole man," it has been profoundly said, "is the organ of the spiritual"; and the whole man, the entire personality, comes out, as nowhere else, in personal relations.

But to come still more closely to our question, let us note that the whole problem of life, of morals, and of religion, is ultimately for us all a problem of the fulfilment of personal relations, human and divine; or the problem simply of bringing the child—man—to a genuine sharing of the life of the Father, to the choice of a character and joy like the Father's; that is, finally, the problem of learning to live the life of love, as complete and all-inclusive. This means that the problem of character is necessarily social. It cannot be individualistic merely, even if it would. We cannot learn to love in a vacuum. The perfection of individual character is love. And love necessarily involves others. We learn to love by loving. The Kingdom of God is within indeed,—the reign of God, who is love, in the individual heart. But this reign of love in the individual is manifestly impossible without recognition everywhere of relations to others. Love *is* the giving of self in personal relations. The Kingdom of God, therefore, is necessarily social,—not personal *and* social, but social because personal. A so-called "social theology," then, has simply, adequately to conceive its problems in strictly personal terms. We are not likely, even in this generation, to over-emphasize the significance of the proposition, "We are members one of another." But we ought to see that that is not something *added* to the personal, but absolutely necessary to any possible conception of the personal and personal relations. To deny that proposition is to make impossible any moral world at all. The social emphasis of

our generation, therefore, does not lead to some quite new kind of theology, any more than its evolutionary emphasis; it only leads to a more adequate conception of the personal.

And, finally, this insistence upon personal terms in theology seems to the writer to be only a return to the great dominant New Testament conception. It is amazing that we have been able so long to believe that the forensic in any form is predominant in the New Testament writers. Many analogies of all sorts are used—the forensic among others—to bring home the meaning of Christ's life and death. But I believe that, even among illustrations, it can be shown that the legal does not lead. Certainly it ought to give us cause for serious thought, that Christ himself nowhere uses even a forensic analogy as to the results of his death; and positively, on the other hand, does make everything depend on personal relation to himself. While in the case of Paul, if any fair weight is given even to his single phrase "in Christ," it must be granted that the personal relation is far and away, and increasingly, the dominant conception in his thinking, in spite of his rabbinical training. The great trouble is, that we have made far more of a few selected scattered illustrations of Paul in his theoretical reasoning, than we have of his multitudinous statements of personal relations in his Christian experience. But no attempt can be made here adequately to enter upon the treatment of this phase of the subject.

I hold, then, that an adequate Christian theology must be stated in personal terms, because the very word "Christian" implies it; because of the growing recognition among theologians of this point of view; because religion is itself a personal relation to God; because the philosophic trend is distinctly personal; because the moral and spiritual characteristics of our time show that the personal has a new clearness for us and far greater recognition; because of

the psychological emphasis on the entire man; because the whole problem of life is ultimately the problem of the fulfilment of personal relations; and because this personal conception lies closest to Christ's own thought and the directest reflections of it in the New Testament. Let us not shrink back from a thoroughgoing attempt to state our entire theology in strict terms of personal relation.

The limits of this article allow but a single application of the principle—the application to the doctrine of Christ; though other applications are not less important. As Christians we start with Christ, our supreme datum. He is our supreme datum because he is the supreme fact of history, and he is the supreme fact of history because he is the supreme person of history. There can be no adequate philosophy that leaves out the greatest fact. So doing, we have thrown away the key at the start.

Christ however, according to his own conception, it is worth saying, is primarily a revelation of a person—not of truth. He is, he believed, God's own supreme self-revelation. And his great value for us, as that of all revelation, is found, not in the fact that he brings us more truths, but that he puts us into personal touch with God himself. In the very meaning of his being he is a revealer of a person.

But only a person can fully reveal a person. If God's personality is granted to be real, and yet in any sense transcendent, any adequate revelation of God must be through a person. Moreover, the revelation that, above all else, we need of God is the revelation of his character, and character cannot be merely told; it must be shown, and it can be shown in reality only in the moral activities of a person. And this revelation of God's character, too, must be in a sphere we can wholly understand and judge, and therefore human in human relations—a human person. That is, Christ must be human that he may be divine. He must really show in his own life the ideal personal relation

to God and to men, in order really to reveal God in his character of love. God must therefore manifest himself as man, in a person whose character we can transfer, feature by feature, to God without any sense of defect. Or, to look at the matter from another point of view, the only redemptive force we know comes through trust in a person. The revelation of God, therefore, if it is to be redemptive, must be through a person, and through a person who can call out absolute trust. We know but one person in history who can call out that trust. We shall make no mistake in saying, he is the supreme self-revelation of God.

But to see that Christ is in his very being a personal revelation of God, is to put our whole thought of his significance and uniqueness in a somewhat different light.

It is noteworthy that those considerations which weigh most with us to-day, in the statement of his uniqueness, are all in the realm of the personal rather than the metaphysical. They do not, of course, exclude metaphysical questions, properly conceived, but they are not primarily metaphysical at all. That is, when we try to face directly the questions: Who is Jesus Christ? what does he mean? how does he reveal God? we find ourselves instinctively led to a series of propositions, as a basis of our belief in his real Divinity, all of which concern his character and personal relations. For myself, at least, the propositions which best set forth the absolute uniqueness of Jesus Christ are such as these: He is the greatest in the greatest sphere—that of the moral and spiritual, speaking with an authority here which no other can pretend to approach: “transcendent among founders of religion,” as Fairbairn puts it, “and to be transcendent here is to be transcendent everywhere.” He is alone the Sinless One; alone among the righteous, in Bushnell’s phrasing, of “impenitent piety.” More than this, with the highest moral ideal conceivable by men, he consciously rises always to his own ideal, and,

in the words of Herrmann, "compels us to admit that he does rise to it." Still further, Jesus has such a character that we can transfer it directly to God, and ask, and need to ask, nothing further. Fairbairn's language seems literally true: "He was the first being who had realized for man the idea of the Divine." He who had seen him had seen the Father. Nor is this all. Jesus has also conscious ability to redeem all other men. As another puts it: "Jesus knows no more sacred task than to point men to his own person." He is himself the one great redeemer. This simply implies, as Denison has pointed out, such a God-consciousness and such sense of mission, as would make any other brain the world has ever seen topple into insanity, but only keeps him sweet, normal, rational, living the most wholesome of all human lives. In consequence of all this, he is in fact the only person in the history of the race who can call out absolute trust, and in whom God certainly finds us. He is for us the Ideal realized, from whom we would take nothing away, to whom we can conceive nothing to be added.

Now it is upon such a series of propositions that I base my confession of the Divinity of Jesus Christ; or rather, it is in such propositions that I do confess his Divinity. But such statements obviously cannot be received in the abstract, upon mere authority, or as result of mere will. They are not philosophical propositions. They must be the outcome of a man's own personal experience of Jesus Christ. The only valuable confession of the Divinity of Christ must follow his own work upon us, not precede it as a condition. In this respect, then, I am in thorough agreement with Herrmann, and should expect every candid Christian to be, when he says: "This thought, that, when the historical Christ takes such hold of us, we have to do with God himself—this thought is certainly the most important element in the confession of the Deity of Christ for

any one whom he has redeemed." An adequate confession of the Divinity of Christ, that is, must emphasize the fact of his personal revelation of God, for the greatest denial of his Divinity must certainly be, not inability to receive certain metaphysical statements about his essence or substance, however time-honored these statements, but the fact that a man does not find God in Christ, that without sense of contradiction he can leave Christ without in his highest religious experiences of communion with God, that he cannot think of Christ as an eternally satisfying revelation of God. Contrast with such a denial, the robust confession of Christ's Divinity, implied in the words of Dr. Behrends, which I suspect many a theologian who would criticise Dr. Behrends' conception of Christ as quite heretical could not make: "The vision of his face is the only vision I ever expect to have of God, as Philip saw in him the Father."

Let us candidly ask ourselves whether we have not really been laying the emphasis on quite the wrong point, in our painful endeavors to decide whether another man admitted the Divinity of Christ. Is there no better test of a man's belief in the Deity of Christ, than whether he can see his way clear to the metaphysical proposition that Christ is of one essence with the Father? *Can* that be the best test, and Christianity be the religion it is? Let us disabuse our minds for a moment of the thought that Herrmann is a Ritschlian heretic, and ask if he is not strictly correct at least in this statement: "The question whether we are right in speaking of the Deity of Christ, when we have found God turning toward us in the disclosure of Jesus' personal life, must be decided according as we conceive God to be in his nature a substance on the one hand, or on the other a Personal Spirit who asserts his nature by the energy of a will directing itself toward certain ends and preserving in itself a certain disposition. If we choose the

former conception of God, then certainly the proposition that there is divine substance in Christ will be chosen as the proper expression of belief in his Deity; but if on the contrary, the latter conception be followed, which is clearly the only one represented in the Sacred Scriptures, and the only one permissible in the Christian community, then it is self-evident that the Deity of Christ can only be expressed by saying that the mind and will of the everlasting God stand before us in the historically active will of this man." In all fairness, let us ask, Is this last an inadequate confession of the Divinity of Christ?

I should myself, indeed, add to Herrmann's statement the consideration, that, with the teleological view of essence or substance which we have found philosophy asserting, a true metaphysical view of the being of Christ could be stated only in terms of the personal purpose of God concerning him; and, since we find the very meaning of the life of Christ in the fact that God is making his supreme self-revelation through him, God's purpose concerning Christ was absolutely unique, and we can say in strict metaphysical terms that Christ is of one essence with the Father. Christ is thus not only morally and spiritually at one with God, and so absolutely unique in his perfect response to the will of God, but also may be said to be metaphysically at one with God, when essence is interpreted teleologically. The newer and the older, the personal and the metaphysical forms of statement would thus fall together; but there can be no doubt that the personal and practical form of the confession of Christ's Divinity is, for the vast majority of men, much the more rational and surer test.

When we turn for a moment from the person of Christ to the work of Christ, we find the same emphasis upon the personal needed. His main work in his earthly life was wrought through personal association with a few men. The Kingdom of God, which he came to found, was a

kingdom of persons, and it began in reality when a single man through personal association with him had come dimly at least to feel what his personality meant, and to choose with him. And eternally, his work is, through his own personal life, to bring men into complete personal communion with the personal God. An ever-deepening and ever more significant friendship with God in Christ—this is eternal life. And the understanding of that life is the chief business of theology.