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ARTICLE III.

THE SEAT OF AUTHORITY IN THE CHRISTIAN
RELIGION.

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THE Holy Spirit is the great teacher. God does all external work through the Son — creation, sustentation, revelation of God to men in the theophanies of the olden time and in the final great revelation nineteen hundred years ago. Christ is the Revealer of God, the Saviour from sin, and the great and final Judge.

But God does all internal work through the Holy Spirit, influencing and leading the heart, convincing of sin, regenerating, teaching and guiding into all truth. The Holy Spirit is the great teacher and revealer of truth. The prophecy of the olden time came not "by the will of man; but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. i. 21). "Of which salvation the prophets have inquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you: searching what or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow" (1 Pet. i. 10, 11). "Every scripture inspired of God is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Tim. iii. 16, 17). Christ so revealed God, as a real personality, that the way was prepared for men to open their hearts and receive the Holy

Spirit, as never before. The great prophetic promise of this was given by Joel: "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions: and also upon the servants and the handmaids in those days will I pour out my Spirit" (Joel ii. 28, 29).

The great and oft-repeated promise of this was given by Christ, as we have it in the Synoptic Gospels, and especially in the last words of our Saviour as we have them in the Gospel by John. Christ sent another Comforter to abide with his disciples and his followers forever; "to teach them all things," "to bring all things to their remembrance" which Christ had said unto them," "to testify of Christ," "to guide them into all truth," "to show them things to come, to glorify Christ, to receive of Christ and show it unto them." These are the promises which Christ gave. Through this Holy Spirit, who was to dwell with and in his followers, Christ still dwells with his people. He is the great Guide and Teacher of his church. The promises that where two or three are gathered together in his name, he is in the midst of them, and "Lo, I am with you alway unto the end of the world," have been fulfilled all through the ages, and Christ is still dwelling with his church to-day. The great prophecy of Joel and the great promise of Christ began to be fulfilled on the day of Pentecost, and there has been a continued fulfilment of them for nineteen hundred years. As Peter said, on the day of Pentecost: "The promise is unto you and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call." The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments which have come down to us were Spirit-breathed. This same Holy Spirit has been in the church through the Christian centuries, in general, teaching

and guiding the church into all truth. He is dwelling with each true believer to-day as his teacher and guide.

This gives us a basis for the examination of a question which is much discussed at the present time, namely, What is the seat of authority in the Christian religion? As we know, various answers have been given. The Roman Catholic Church and some Anglican bodies say that the Pope or the Church is the seat of authority; the Protestant world, from Luther's time until recently, has claimed that the Bible is the seat of authority; and now a reactionary wave has appeared, and we are told that the seat of authority rests in each individual Christian consciousness. Which of these is right? Is any one of them a sufficient answer to the question? It seems to me that no one of them is sufficient alone, and that, as is so often the case, there is a great truth in each one of these theories, which have had, or now have, so many earnest, conscientious advocates. Is not the seat of authority in the Christian religion triune? Are there not three coördinate seats, so to speak, with the same Holy Spirit as the vivifying, power-giving, unifying Spirit in them all, namely, the Bible, the church, and the individual Christian consciousness? Either one of these taken alone is fraught with danger, and may lead to error. All three of them wisely combined, and used under the guidance of the Spirit of truth, will lead to the truth.

1. *The Bible.* How shall we use it? Shall we formulate our theories or bring our inherited views of truth to the Bible and seek for proof-texts? This has been done, with the result that the advocates of diametrically opposite theories think they have proved them from the Bible. No; we should go to the Bible, as Luther did, on our knees, asking that our hearts and minds may be dispossessed, as far as possible, of all human theories, and that we may be shown by the Holy Spirit the

great *proof trends* of the Bible, the great gulf-currents, so to speak, which run through it, revealing to us the person and the great work of Christ in the salvation of men. The Bible has such currents running through it which are like water-marks in paper, that cannot be destroyed without destroying the paper itself. The Bible is like a fabric which was dyed red in the warp and woof before it was woven, so that if you pull out all the red strands there is nothing left. When a little tree which has been growing in its pot for a long time is removed, it takes all the earth out with it. The little rootlets so interlace and entwine themselves about the soil that there is nothing left in the pot when the tree is taken out. There are great, vital, fundamental truths of Christianity whose roots are so interlaced and entwined about the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments that if we attempt to take them out, there seems to be nothing left. Such are the love of the Father, the Divinity and Saviourhood of Christ, the indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit, the Living Christ with the Christian, the worth of man, the enormity of sin, and the sure hope of immortality. When we find such truths shining out on every page of God's Word, we may rest in them as God's truth, certified by the Spirit of truth in these Scriptures which are Spirit-revealed and Spirit-breathed.

2. *The Church.* How shall we use the church as an authority? Shall we take the decisions of the great councils and of the popes as authoritative? No, we cannot do this, for both councils and popes have given diametrically opposite decisions. Shall we take the belief or the creed of one great branch of the church as our authority? No, this is too partial, too narrow. But, since the Spirit of truth has been in the church through the ages, guiding into the truth, we may look at the great churches of the world and at the great creeds of Christendom

much as we did at the Bible, and when we find great gulf-currents of belief common to them all, running through them, believed by them in all ages, we may be pretty sure that they are authoritative. It is a remarkable fact that the great, vital, fundamental facts of the Christian faith have persisted in all ages, and are believed and held by all branches of the church — Greek, Roman, and Protestant. Many additions of unimportant or extra-scriptural, and sometimes anti-scriptural, doctrines are found, but in the great, vital, essential principles they agree. Just so, look through Schaff's "Creeds of Christendom," there is a wonderful agreement in the great, vital, fundamental truths.

It is remarkable, also, that these great, fundamental truths of the gospel, in which all the great creeds agree, are the very ones which we discover as the gulf-currents running through the Bible. These two sources support each other and come with a cumulative, double authority.

It is also interesting to notice that most of the so-called doctrinal points on which the three great branches of Christendom, and also the great churches of the Protestant communion, disagree, are minor, non-essential, not worthy to be compared with the great truths which form the gulf-currents of Scripture. This is shown by the fact that those minor doctrinal differences are fading out, and we see to-day such churches as Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregational making plans for organic union on the basis of a common creed or declaration of belief. Several years ago, when the Constitution of the Doshisha school was restored, the question arose, what should be the definition of the Christianity which is the basis of the moral teaching in the school, and it was settled as follows: "We understand that the Christianity which by the unchangeable principles of the Constitution is the foundation of the

morality which is taught in the school, consists of that body of vital, fundamental truths which are believed and accepted in common by the great Christian churches in the world." But there is

3. *The Individual Christian Consciousness.* The Holy Spirit was promised to the individual Christian. The living Christ dwells by his Spirit, as he promised, in the heart of every true believer. Will he not guide each one into the truth? Does the Christian need any other guide as to what is vital, fundamental truth? Some say that the Christian consciousness is sufficient, that the authority of the Bible is only so far as it *finds* us, so far as it appeals to the individual religious consciousness. They say that the creeds of the church and the general consensus of Christendom have value only as the individual consciousness of each believer finds the articles of the creed or the general consensus of the church in harmony with his own Christian consciousness. In short, the individual Christian consciousness is made the only criterion. Each individual Christian has an all-sufficient seat of authority in his own heart.

This would be a very simple and satisfactory principle if it were true. But, is it true? Does the Holy Spirit usually, or ever, in a single instance, so take possession of a man as to entirely supersede and override that man's own prepossessions, idiosyncrasies, his conscious or unconscious selfish leanings? This is very doubtful; and, even if there are such rare instances or rare moments or intervals when this is true, Christians generally are not thus completely under the teaching and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Of the few Christians who think and assert that they are thus perfectly taught and guided by the Holy Spirit, it is perhaps often true that they are less completely guided by the Holy Spirit than some others who make no such

claim. We do not lose our own identity or our personality by the Spirit's indwelling presence. It is we ourselves who think, weigh, consider, judge, and make every decision as to faith and conduct. The Holy Spirit is an inner light, a teacher, a guide, but he does not make our decisions for us. We may be so under the influence of our prepossessions or desires that we shall form wrong judgments and make wrong decisions. That this is so, is very evident from the facts of church history, and of Christian belief and practice in the world to-day. It is one of the objections brought against the doctrine of the indwelling presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit that some of those who have emphasized this the most have fallen into dangerous errors and excesses; for example, the Pietists, the Mystics, and some of the advocates of "The Inner Light."

No man can be sure that his own personal judgment of what is truth and what is right is correct, by the criterion of his Christian consciousness alone. He must use his individual consciousness; but let him compare his judgments and decisions with the great gulf-currents of God's Word, and with the convictions of the church universal in all ages, and especially with those faiths and convictions which gave the apostles their power, which moved the whole Roman world so mightily for two centuries after Pentecost, which have been the motive power of the church ever since, and which are, to-day, the basis of the faith of the great churches which are moving the world. If we find that the convictions and conclusions reached by our Christian consciousness agree with the great gulf-currents of Scripture and with the general consensus of the Christian church in all ages, on the great, vital, fundamental principles of the Christian faith, we may feel pretty sure that we are right; but if they are contrary to the gulf-currents of the Bible, and to the belief and teaching of the church in all

ages, we should pause long and consider very carefully before we accept for ourselves, or teach to others, these conclusions.

Since each of these criteria has been, or is, in general, under the influence and guidance of the same Spirit of truth, they ought to agree, and it is safe to say that they will agree if the seeker after the truth is fully under the guidance of that Spirit who was the author and the inspirer of the truth contained in God's Word, and who has been in his church in all ages, guiding that church into the truth.

Let us make sure that these great, fundamental, universal truths, which have always been the power of God and the wisdom of God unto salvation to all who believe them, are so made a part of our faith and spiritual life, that we shall live them, teach them, preach them, always and everywhere. Only thus shall we succeed in the great work of saving the men among whom we dwell.

One thing more. Ought not those churches and bodies of Christians who hold these great, vital, fundamental truths in common to forget their minor differences enough to come into federated union in all forms of Christian work, thus emphasizing these great truths at a time when many of them are called in question, and presenting to the world such union, zeal, and power that our Saviour's last prayer may be answered: "That they all may be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me" (John xvii. 21)?