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## BLESSED BE VAGUENESS.

BY THE REV. CHARLES COURTENAY, M.A., Chaplain of  
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(Concluded from p. 272.)

## V.

THE *Bible* has its problems many, problems which always wait upon necessary vagueness.

Until I know more fully the Divine methods, and know better the Divine reasons, I am content to hold fast to my Bible as the very message of my God. If the Holy Book has a power which no other book in the world approaches, if its virtues reach down into my inner depths, if it transfigures my soul, and sweeps away with its revelations the scudding mists of life, I am content not to know everything about its difficulties, assured that I need not know, and can wait for their solutions. For all its vagueness, it works. Good motives spring out of its pages, and, under its influences, life is consolidated securely. I would rather be a humble reader and believer than sit over it as its dissector, cutting away its life. The frozen beings who let their doubts run wild about its truth, and exhale icy breaths upon the warm believing world, are too stiff and hard for warm-blooded souls who have found their icy natures dissolved by its heat and radiance. Any theory which makes a man the less devout and Christian than he was stands condemned. The great Father, Whose great Heart beats under its lines, must needs by His greatness give us a book full of hard problems and vague mysteries.

## VI.

So, too, are the *great doctrines of our faith* fringed with vaguenesses. The facts are clear enough, and there is always light enough in them to walk by, but human reason does not always secure a fitting answer to its queries. Yet none of its difficulties are unreasonable to faith, and intuition is never shocked by them. It is to the busy logician who wants to get to their roots that they present ungainly proportions. But why worry about the roots if the flowers which spring from them smell sweet, and if their fruit provides us with sufficient and appetizing food?

And here we discover the reason of the cleavages in the churches. It is not the practical Christians who ever quarrel ; it is only the theologians who, keen in forming dogmatic systems and rounding off their creeds, have forced truths into strange and needless moulds. It was when men began to define and explain and give reasons that they spoiled the Church's unity. Vagueness they would not have at any price, and, to disperse it, they trod a road which led them straight upon controversial trouble. Any reason, it seems, was better than none, even a bad one. And so schisms grew and still flourish in our unhappy midst. But vagueness, after all, was better.

What endless battles are being fought on the question of *the Church* in men's efforts to produce a scheme which shall be of crystal clearness. The Church, as a congregation of faithful men scattered over the wide world, holding fast to one Lord, accepting His provision of the Word and the Sacraments, and partaking of them with thankful hearts, we can all clearly understand. We have no quarrels here, nor can have.

But there were vague spots in the definition which must be mended and elaborated and extended. It was not a sufficiently sharp weapon, it seems, against those who differed from the generality. And so busy men tinkered at the idea until it was cleared of every possible ambiguity, and stood at last the finished, well-rounded system that we are familiar with in the Church of Rome. It must be visible ; it must possess one head—one Pope of Rome ; its members must believe all that that Church asserts. And so clear is everything that half or more of Christendom find themselves suspended in mid air, churchless and hopeless. The vagueness is all gone, and so is a good deal of Christendom. Better vagueness, all honest men will say, than this false, absurd, and impossible position.

## VII.

And, just as the ingenuities of men have made such narrow grooves that nobody can move comfortably in them except those reduced by the system to its own patent proportions, so have the *means of approach* into the Church been reduced and systematized.

The *Sacraments* as spiritual means of grace for spiritual people are not hard to understand, and if there remain some vaguenesses about them they are not material in themselves. But it seems these

must go too. And so they have become materialized by many, and, according to them, are not only means of grace but the grace itself in the mere operation. Baptism necessarily confers life, and to be baptized is to need no more the spirit of life but simply the revival of a buried life. It is a miraculous operation, secured by the intervention of a priest, apart from any inner disposition or fitness before or after. Better the vagueness which leaves much open, and, insisting on the change of position of the baptized, puts upon him the duty of being what he is put in the way of being, a true child of God by faith in Christ Jesus. Ecclesiastical fictions are not always Divine facts, and to assure an unconverted soul that because he is baptized he necessarily has life is to lead him to a false position, to harden him into a groundless assurance concerning his destiny, and thus cut off the chance of saving him eternally. Materialism has always been the foe of spirituality, and in salvation by ordinances men are materializing what must essentially be spiritual or nothing. It is in *the Lord's Supper* that we find this extrusion of vagueness so peculiarly disastrous, rending as it has the Church in twain.

The original idea that in the Holy Communion we feasted at the Lord's Table, and feasted on Christ in our hearts by faith, were really strengthened and uplifted by the sacred food, were really brought in living contact with Christ Himself in Whom we were trusting, and was clear enough for simple Christians. But it must be made clearer, and be improved out of all recognition, and be buried under human explanations until our feast of communion has become a battle-ground. And with the elaboration of the sacrament have come in such other aspects as have destroyed the whole ordinance to simple folk. Now the symbols are no longer a sign but the reality itself. The symbols disappear, and in their place is found by a sort of magical exchange the very Body and Blood of the Lord. Or the symbols are covered and overwhelmed by the associated Body and Blood. And so He is to be looked for, not in the faithful hearts of the communicants, but upon the so-called altar, there to be worshipped and adored. Instead of a feast to be taken, it is a sacrifice to be offered. And it scarcely matters whether men partake or not, mostly, they had better not, just look on and worship. Blessed be vagueness, we say, than this elaboration all human and man-invented. Better not to know than to know thus materially what is false.

## VIII.

*The atonement*, too, with all its precious burden of fruit and blessing, has become the battle-ground of warring theologians.

And yet, with the simple facts before us, we thought we had knowledge enough for practical blessing. We have the facts clearly enough, that Christ died for us, that on the ground of that death all who come find forgiveness and life, and that He bridged the gulf and made a way for every sinner who chooses to trust and cling to Him. And some of us have crossed by the new and living way, and found ourselves at home with God. What more do we want? But by some, yea many, more was demanded, namely, an elaborate philosophy of the cross, a satisfactory theory of the atonement, a reasoned apology for the inner and Divine methods. In the face of such theories, so human and unsatisfactory, and seeing how every such theory only leads to conflict in which the cross gets trodden out, we say, blessed be vagueness, a thousand-fold more blessed.

On the subject of *the after life*, too, vagueness exists in plenty, and dark places abound. It has been left purposely vague, we think. It is better not to know.

But men have thought otherwise, and have been at great pains to fill up the gaps, making a system of the life beyond which has been woven out of their own imaginations from beginning to end. Ingenious very, and false very. And one invention has led to another until there has been blown out that bladder-like scheme of purgatory with its accompanying notions of masses for the dead and priestly efforts to shorten the time. And now all is clear about the other side, and there are no dark shadows, and men can make merchandise of its deliverances, and feather their own nests with the spoil. But vagueness is better than these monstrous concoctions, and these will-o'-the-wisp lights which are manifest signs of the marshes and corruptions from which they spring.

This impatience of vagueness breaks out in many other directions, and the many *schools of prophecy* are tokens of men's interest in it and sometimes of their vagaries and guesses. Not, of course, that all schools of prophetic thought stand upon the same level, for there are sane schools and insane ones, systems which have solid Scripture at their back, and systems which are the fruits of tortured texts and imaginary interpretations.

But blessed be vagueness here, too, because it is better to hold fast to the great fact of a Second Coming with its few great attendant facts. That Christ is coming is the joy of the whole Church, and the goal to which their eyes are cast day by day. But times and seasons, order, and fillings up which a complete system demands, as some think, only evoke controversy. To remain in the vague may seem to the enthusiastic exponents woeful and wilful neglect, but it is after all the surer side.

### IX.

This discontent with vagueness is the cause of some of the new systems of the day which, but for the prevailing vagueness on certain great tracts of life, would have had no temptation to emerge.

*Christian Science* is one of them. It has produced a gospel for the body, and has added a series of comments upon it which are said to be of inspired or semi-inspired origin. At any rate, Mrs. Eddy's interpretation of the Bible is set alongside the Word of God, and is perhaps read more by her followers. It is a deliberate attempt to dissolve the vaguenesses of revelation by metaphysics which no metaphysician can understand. And with it is mingled a great deal of positive truth which is certainly divine truth. But this gospel of rest and fearlessness and prayer and faith is the common property of all Christendom. There is no vagueness in these because they are God's revealed truth. But all else, such as the illusions of pain and sickness and death, is all her own invention and more than doubtful. Had all this been left vague, Christian Science would have been common Christian heritage, as much ours as theirs. The best of Christian Science we all have as Christians; the worst of it we do not want; we prefer vagueness.

*Theosophy*, too, is an effort to make clear what has purposely been left vague.

The constitution of man's nature, and the nature of man's future, have been left unexplained except in a general way, just enough for man's practical use, and no more. Here was the opportunity for man's invention, and so, from the old Gnostics and early heretics down to Madame Blavatsky's theosophy, the world has been treated to an elaborate expansion of man's nature which is startling in its ingenuities. Its wonderful psychology, showing such evolutions as man had never conceived possible, and reaching out into spheres hitherto undreamed of and into ages upon ages, fairly makes the

mind reel under its complexities. It is rather too clear for our acceptance. It is too well thought out. It knows too much about the invisible world and the distant future and the careers of men after death. Moreover, it is an unpleasant echo of systems which have been tried in other forms and failed hopelessly. It is claimed not to be anti-Christian or anti-anything, but, if Christianity can lose all its specific contents and remain Christian, then we may call it a supplement to the Christian faith. But let us be under no delusion about it. It trundles its balls through our Christian facts and doctrines, until scarcely one of them is left standing. Indeed, it is anti-Christian to the core. Blessed rather be vagueness than these false lights with their faulty origin and sham science, empty promises, and impossible positions.

All these revolts against Christian vagueness are just samples which all Church History gives us, for every heresy is an attempt to clear up dark places and fill up the gaps. Not content to wait and trust, men have rushed at conclusions which the Christian Church has been obliged to denounce. Any solution seemed to them better than none. And so they have filled up the Great Master's canvas wherever blank spaces were found with grotesque and impossible objects which go far to spoil the whole picture. And the impatient lovers of novelty, of whom there are too many abroad, have accepted and acclaimed their inventions.

They have not understood that vagueness in the religious sphere is a frequent necessity, like the dim glass with which we survey the sun, like the reserve which every good teacher practises in the lower forms of his school, like the teaching of the letters of the alphabet one by one before the forming of the words—in short, the simple before the complex.

## X.

I am well aware that thus to elevate vagueness to a blessed position requires some qualification. My last words must deal with the *dangers* attendant upon vagueness and the cases where it may be dispersed.

We must never forget that vagueness is in us, and not in the truths themselves. It is all in our own limitations. To the Divine Intelligence all is clear.

And let us not forget either that vagueness is no final state, only temporary. "Now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face

to face." Our present vagueness is as a morning twilight on the way to daylight and sunshine. When the child becomes a man the child's dullness of apprehension will pass away in the larger life.

It is wise, too, to understand that vagueness in the great religious spheres extends not to what has to be done in practical life, but only to its origins and roots of meaning. The pathways for the soul's movements are as plain and clear as the roads along which our daily steps are taken. For he who is willing to take one step at a time may be sure that that step is open to him. But we may not see far into the spiritual future.

It is also clear that to qualify for much light we must use the light we have. He who acts in the vague twilight will find less vagueness for the action. Mists go when we boldly plunge into them. It is those who wait for full daylight in life who stand still and weep.

If we can but remember such facts and truths we shall not be so foolish as to take up impossible positions and thus run into great peril.

Thus, some will glorify vagueness as a final state and refuse the light, because vagueness seems better. They will wilfully suffocate their own understandings, and put out their own eyes in order to glorify their blindness. Not thus do we act as intelligent people. Vagueness is excellent when it is all the knowledge we have, but when more can be ascertained we do wrong to rest in it. God never gave us minds to reduce them to nothingness, nor to hand them over to others, be they churches or systems. They are for use, not for foolish submission.

It is a peril, too, when we are tempted to think more of the halo than of the sun. In inferior photographic lenses, while the centre is true, the edges are useless, because of their distortions. Such edges certainly yield bright prismatic colours, and they may appeal to the eye as extremely beautiful, but they spoil the picture on the negative when the open aperture is used. In early days men had to put up with them because the better lenses were not invented. But there is no excuse for them now. And so it is with the vague in life and religion; it is to be accepted only so long as it is necessary.

One would have expected that with such prevailing and necessary vagueness in life, and especially in religious life, that the spirit of sweet charity would have reigned. But we do not find it so.



Vagueness and dimness are the seats of controversy and conflict. It is one of the great perils of the vague that it leaves so much more room for differing opinions. And so we find that the greater the nebulosity which surrounds a truth, the more arrogant are those who gaze upon it. Where the least light is vouchsafed there men become most assured and positive. There is no controversy about the bright centres of truth, but about the edges of it. In that undefined region where eyesight fails and wise men keep silent there the ignorant will shout the loudest. And there, too, the eye gazes longest, as if there truth gave its greatest lustre. Why do not men see that where the full revelation has not been granted there silence is the better course, and that in the undefined regions of truth and life vagueness should be left vague, instead of seeking to tease something out of it which it was never intended to yield?

But, while we are to respect the vague, and speak kindly of its messages, we must not deny the chance to penetrate it by stronger powers. There was vagueness enough in the heavens aforesaid when only the naked eye gazed into their starry spaces. Men were content then not to know. But, with a telescope turned towards these dim depths, lo! the vague became clear. And so, when God heightens our inner powers, or sends a man with eyes keener than our own, we shall find resolved much of the vagueness of life. But there will still be vagueness, as there are still stars yet unrevealed in the heavens.

To love vagueness for itself is sheer obscurantism. To abide in vagueness when fresh revelations come is sheer folly. To shut our eyes to the light is irreligious. And to ban a thinker in the supposed interests of vagueness is to ban the oculist who is able to excise your cataract for you.

It may seem as if by expressing the dangers which await vagueness I am moderating and diminishing my praises of it. Not at all. It is still blessed in its own sphere, and amidst the dimness which God seems to have permitted and enjoined. But beyond that sphere it is more blessed to be clear. It serves its purpose when we are in our pupilage, and so long as we can bear no more light upon our weak eyes, but as the eyes grow stronger the need for vagueness passes away.