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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

WHAT IS REVERENCE ?

BY THE REV. W. S. HOOTON, B.D.

PREBENDARY FOX, not long ago, summed up in a telling phrase one marked tendency of modern thought and writing concerning which there appears to be much confusion of mind. "The opposition," he wrote, "takes many forms. There is the open refusal of those who have said, 'We will not have this Man to reign over us.' But long before this is reached, there are subtle developments of thought where *respect comes short of reverence*, where obedience is subject to conditions, loyalty to reservations, and where men, often pious and learned, try to effect a compromise between the real and the unreal."

Several of these phrases are suggestive enough ; but it is the one which is italicized in our quotation that bears upon the idea of this paper. What is reverence ? Many current expressions, glibly used, indicate a great need for clearing of thought. In connexion with the study of the Bible, we are constantly hearing of "reverent criticism." Distinctions are drawn between "rash" or "extreme" and "moderate" or "reverent" critics ; and even conservative scholars are heard to insist on the debt which we owe to the latter. It is held to be one of the marks of enlightenment to applaud these utterances, and the surest sign of bigotry to suggest even the shadow of a doubt. Well, it is good to "prove all things." No harm is done by inquiry ; and if there is a reverent criticism, let us by no means make the mistake of including its adherents in indiscriminating condemnation. The unfortunate ambiguity of language makes it necessary here to explain that the word "critic" is used in the generally accepted sense, and not according to that strict application by which it can be taken to describe even the most conservative student of the origins and the text of Scripture. Our purpose is to inquire into the reverence of moderate adherents of the current hypotheses of criticism, and to judge them out of their own mouths.

It is unnecessary even to mention the names of any critics of the more extreme order. But several names of the former class will readily come to mind. Perhaps the most typical is that of the late Professor Driver. He is constantly quoted as an example of a

class of devout students sincerely believing in a divine revelation through Scripture, and convinced that the main hypotheses of criticism in no way interfere with that revelation. It is with men like this that we have to do—men whose sincerity and single-mindedness are beyond doubt, and whose devoutness no one has dared to question.

Let us examine some of the utterances of these men in relation to two branches of the subject—their attitude towards the Bible, and their attitude towards our Lord Himself.

I. With reference to the former, it must be remembered that their contention is that the Bible is not itself in its completeness the Word of God, but that it contains that Word. Many of us, of course, repudiate that position altogether; but we must be fair in discussion, and must realize it may be argued that such a distinction affects at any rate the matter of *reverence*, which is our sole subject of present discussion. Even this is not to be granted without demur; for our Lord's treatment of Scripture, and that of the Apostles, indicates that they regarded it as the Word of God in its entirety—and the reverence, moreover, of their allusions to it is something so very different from the "respect" (shall we say?) shown in the references of modern critics of any class, that it might reasonably be maintained that this itself is a strong point against their claim to handle reverently the Scriptures of truth. But we desire to-day to take no ground on which the discussion can be side-tracked. It is better to take our stand to this extent on the critics' own ground, and see whether they are reverent from their own point of view—however inconceivable it may appear to us that God should have determined to give man a revelation of truth and then arranged it so that he should be left to flounder in a morass of uncertainty where he might find solid ground, or (to change the metaphor) should be abandoned to the mercy of every fresh guide in the wilderness. Indeed, the position seems all the more incredible in view of the fact, which we shall find illustrated later on, that according to some of the critics (even "reverent" ones) part of the material amid which the revelation is enshrined is not only not the Word of God, but is positively misleading, and must be ruthlessly discarded before that revelation can be found.

Another difficulty arises from the fact that some of those who will be mentioned have already passed from our midst. The rule

“de mortuis” is by some perhaps considered binding; but in a matter of this moment it should not be difficult to meet the difficulty by avoiding personal bitterness towards either the living or the dead: and this is what it is desired to do.

First, then, a brief reference to Dr. Driver. It would be difficult in any case to leave out so typical a representative of the School we have in view. But we want to pass on to more detailed references from the works of other scholars, and will only be brief here. Many of us have read his Commentary on Genesis. Is it too much to say that the broad effect of what he writes—especially on the opening sections of the book—must be to delight the heart of the infidel? And can everything be quite right, from the point of view of reverence, when that is the result? Such an one is not likely to be charmed by the common critical assurances of spiritual beauty underlying the narratives, or even to be disarmed by comparisons with the less enlightened records of other nations. What he wants is to prove the Bible wrong: and he undoubtedly finds in Dr. Driver, for example, an ally he would not have found, e.g. in St. Paul. This should be enough at any rate to induce a feeling of uncomfortable doubt. No allowance is made (if personal recollection rightly serves) for the fallibility and changing character of scientific opinions. This sweeping assertion of inaccuracy can scarcely be viewed as strictly reverent. Again, it is notorious that Professor Driver treated many distinct declarations that “the Lord spake unto Moses” as of no account. Concerning large sections of the narrative at any rate, the Lord did not speak to Moses at all in his opinion, but Jews of many centuries later invented the whole thing—Mosaic authority and all. It is really difficult for most people who would like to be thought reverent to understand how such a narrative can be held even to “contain” the Word of God, or to understand how reverence can be attributed either to the alleged authors of this kind of composition or to the interpreters who can adopt without a moral shock such a view of the form in which it has pleased God to convey to us His revelation.

But let us pass to a more detailed illustration, from another writer of the first rank, who would certainly be reckoned in this class—Sir George Adam Smith: and let us take it from his best-known work, his exposition of the Book of Isaiah. In that work he is obsessed by a peculiar idea with regard to Isaiah ii. 1-5, which

cropped up from time to time in his opening chapters. In our day the beauty and restful charm of that wonderful prophecy are more than ever apparent. We are beginning to see how, after perhaps no long interval, the King of kings, the Prince of peace, will Himself introduce and establish that glorious predicted reign of peace. But to the learned author it is, at least as applied here, an example of unenlightened expectations at a period of unchastened and self-confident enthusiasm. It seemed to Isaiah at first as if he could lift up the people by his own word (ver. 5) to that ideal state, and he has to learn the truth by the painful experience of disappointment. Now, on the broadest grounds (we will come to the extraordinary details presently), can this be held to be a reverent attitude towards any part of prophecy, or indeed could any such utterance be considered to "contain" the Word of God in any sense at all? Perhaps it might be argued that as this prophecy appears elsewhere, and therefore Isaiah may only have accepted it for himself (as Sir G. A. Smith considers he anyhow did), the passage is even so not deprived of its glorious uplift for our weary times. It seems so much simpler—and really it seems more reverent—to believe that God was truly inspiring His servant to reveal, in the power of the Holy Spirit, what should veritably come to pass!

But now for the promised quotation in detail. The culmination of this obsession appears on p. 61 (vol. i.). This is the passage—“And, as we have seen, there is every reason to believe that Isaiah did at first share the too easy public religion of his youth. That early vision of his (ii. 2-5), the establishment of Israel at the head of the nations, to be immediately attained at his own word (v. 5), and without preliminary purification, was it not simply a less gross form of the king's own religious presumption? Uzziah's fatal act was the expression of the besetting sin of his people, and in that sin Isaiah himself had been a partaker. 'I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.' In the person of their monarch the temper of the whole Jewish nation had come to judgment. . . . The prophet's eyes were opened.”

Now unless this means that the confession of Isaiah vi. 5 (just quoted) has definite reference to the prophecy of ii. 2-5, and that in uttering that prophecy, or at any rate in his application of it, Isaiah *sinned* in the same way as the presumptuous King Uzziah, though

it may be in less degree, it would seem that words lose their meaning. Is "reverent" the right epithet for that ?

And it is all so pitifully unnecessary. Whatever is there in Isaiah ii. 5 to give ground for all this monstrous edifice of irreverent imaginings ?

Let us now take an example or two from New Testament criticism. And let the first be from Dr. M'Neile's learned Commentary on St. Matthew. The author is known as a devotional writer as well as a theologian, and would no doubt come within our definition in most people's eyes. What is his view of the reliability of that Gospel as we have it ? He shows up, indeed, the extreme follies of some critics. Nevertheless, in at least thirty instances in the last eight chapters alone, he betrays in one way or another his own doubts of the record. And he is sure that some "additions" are "certainly apocryphal," and that the writer used "very little critical sifting." Any passage, in fact, may be overthrown, without the least manuscript evidence, if he decides so. Even the "literary evidence" for the Virgin Birth, though it does not appear that it is rejected by him personally, is treated as if it might reasonably be considered inferior to that provided by the "congruity" of that doctrine with "the whole body of Christian belief." (As if the Creeds would survive if the records on which they rest were destroyed !) Dr. M'Neile speaks of "the unmistakable stamp of genuineness." But what two critics will agree in all cases where this elusive quality is claimed ? God has not left us in such chaos : and is there not a spiritual instinct which revolts against the claim that this kind of treatment is "reverent" in the case of records in which it has pleased Him to embody all that we know of the way of salvation ? How could they even certainly "contain" it ?

Our last example under this division of our subject is from a recent book by Dr. Garvie—*The Purpose of God in Christ*. On pp. 77-8 he writes : "The revelation of God in Jesus Christ is organic, it is a living whole, and just as a living body can assimilate only what is akin and not foreign to its substance, so there are statements in the Holy Scriptures which do not accord with the revelation of God in Christ, and Christian theology should not attempt to include them in the creed it offers to the Church." Just afterwards two examples are given of what is meant by this astonishing assertion. "The doctrine of election, for which texts of Scripture can be

quoted, has gone except in a few theological survivals of a happily dead past ; the doctrine of eternal punishment is going to the same scrap-heap, even although still more texts in its support can be quoted." I venture to say that not only the attitude towards Scripture, but the very phraseology, is *irreverent*, and betrays a mind fatally distorted in its view of Scripture by familiarity with irreverent handling of it. Observe—Dr. Garvie does not, as some might, deny that these doctrines are Scriptural. He confesses, apparently, that they are ; and then contemptuously consigns them to the "scrap-heap," because "the Christian reason and conscience and spirit" (forsooth) "judge these doctrines as incongruous with the love of God through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ in the community of the Spirit." What are the plain implications of this, when stripped of verbal subterfuge and rhetorical disguise ? Simply that the modern conscience is beyond comparison more enlightened than the apostolic, and even that the Master's own spirit moved on a lower level than that of the modern theologian. This kind of verbal respect for "the revelation of God in Christ" is thus seen to **over** the worst kind of implied irreverence.

In another place (p. 91) Dr. Garvie refers to 1 Corinthians xv. 28 as something which "Paul conjectures." In this instance the "conjecture" appears to be approved of : but we have already seen it is not so in all cases, and the phrase throws a flood of light on the author's view of Scripture, and on the ease with which anything can be repudiated if it does not suit the author's point of view. It is a marvel that so sincere and acute a thinker as Dr. Garvie undoubtedly is, can fail to see that the upshot of his book is to represent his own "conjectures," in any case in which he acts as censor on St. Paul, as greatly superior to those of that Apostle.

2. The other matter is even more serious. What is the attitude of modern writers towards our Lord and His teaching ? In our last example we have already discovered an implied illustration of it. And in this matter we continually trace the inevitable advance of criticism in the course of years. It may confidently be affirmed that statements now frequently made about our Lord could not have been written without the long sapping process which has undermined real reverence, first for the Old Testament, and then for the New. In the attacks now openly made upon the accuracy of our Lord's own expectations and teaching with regard to eschatology

we see the real tendency of modern criticism unmasked. The central citadel of the Faith is under siege.

And even in matters where criticism has touched the authority of our Lord it is possible to trace a development of a similar character. The earlier doubts thrown by critics on the position adopted so strongly by Bishop Ellicott in his *Christus Comprobator*, and by other similar writers, were of a much milder character. When they were confronted with our Lord's authority for the authorship of the Pentateuch or the 110th Psalm, or for the historicity of Jonah, or of the Bible narrative of the Flood (a subject lately once more the sport of every unbeliever in the land through the deplorable utterance of one of our Deans in Convocation), it was possible for them to give a reply which did not openly outrage Christian feeling. True, it was a very involved and wonderful reply; and many of us have never ceased to marvel how it could really satisfy anybody. But at any rate they saved their reverence—to some extent at least—even if it was at the expense of their logic. But we have now got long past that.

What shall be said of these words from Dr. M'Neile's Commentary on St. Matthew? "It is impossible to escape the conclusion that Jesus, as Man, expected the End within the lifetime of His contemporaries." And this with reference to a statement introduced by our Lord's specially solemn formula *ἀμήν λέγω ὑμῖν* (Matt. xxiv. 34).

The same commentary is unsatisfactory in its treatment of the Temptation. It leaves doubt whether the personality of the Tempter is recognized at all, and certain phrases lead to a very serious question in one respect. In each of the three cases it is said that our Lord addressed the quotation ("It is written") to "His own heart," or to "Himself." Now it is impossible to say—it is in fact well-nigh impossible to believe—that the author really means these words to convey the meaning which one would think they must most naturally suggest. But is it not at least amazing that a writer of his ability should be able to pen such words (and to pen them thrice, with apparent emphasis) without any consciousness that they *might* suggest such an idea, and that he should not have guarded with the most scrupulous care against any such a possibility? And an equally serious question in any case arises with regard to other writers. Whether Dr. M'Neile believes there is a personal devil or

not, very many modern writers do not believe it—and probably some of them would be classed as “reverent.” Where, then, do they think these temptations came from? Such questions are most painful. But the issue is too serious to permit of countenance being given to the specious concealment under which such essential irreverence of thought is too often cloaked.

This terrible tendency of advance is illustrated by our final quotation. We should expect the late Dr. Bruce to be ranked among reverent students. All the more startling are these words (Matt, xvi. 28, *Expos. G.T.*)—“Christ’s speech was controlled not merely by His own thoughts but by the hopes of the future entertained by His disciples. He had to promise the advent of the Son of Man in His Kingdom or of the Kingdom of God in power (Mk.) within a generation, whatever His own forecast as to the future might be.”

One might be excused for scarcely believing one’s eyes. Is there any possible interpretation which could avoid the awful implication that these words seem necessarily to bear? It is true that the context speaks of the two alternatives suggested by His eschatological teaching. But nothing can take away the sinister force of that sentence. And it seems so surprising even from an expositor’s point of view. Nothing was farther from our Lord’s practice than to encourage the mistaken impressions of His disciples, especially as to the coming of the Kingdom. Acts i. 7 is an example of this.

Now it is impossible to believe that a man like Dr. Bruce could have brought himself to write such a sentence if he had not become accustomed first to ways of regarding the Bible, and even the Saviour Himself, in which “respect comes short of reverence.” If I say such an utterance is almost incredibly atrocious, I suppose I shall be accused of uncharitable judgment. But really, if the formularies of our Church can characterize errors of a different order as “blasphemous fables and dangerous deceits,” what is the appropriate language to use to-day about this kind of thing?

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