

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 *The Churchman* can be found here:

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

MODERNISM AND CHRISTOLOGY.

BY THE REV. H. LAWRENCE PHILLIPS, M.A., Rector of Poole.

THE term Modernism was first of all applied to the attempt associated with the names of Loisy, Tyrrell, and Duchesne, made within the Roman Church to bring her teaching and the expression of her doctrine more into touch with modern thought and the fuller knowledge possessed by our day and generation. The movement was a comparatively short-lived one, and (as might be expected) was soon condemned by the Papacy; and some of its leaders resisting, were crushed.

In the freer atmosphere of the Anglican Communion an attempt professedly similar in character is being made, and has received rather more attention from the outside world than perhaps might have been expected, because of the utterances, published broadcast, of its more extreme leaders. The movement deserves consideration and notice, and its demands must be weighed and judged. Rome has settled the question by the voice of authority; we cannot, and perhaps happily so. The movement must pass through the furnace of criticism with us, and the only answer we can give will be the outcome of that criticism. Reason and scholarship must answer, rejecting or accepting the positions taken up in the name of reason and scholarship. The demand that is made by Modernism is that as "Christian theology is the science of Christianity . . . it needs a developing theology . . . and will therefore require from time to time a re-expression of truths, none the less true because they are old, or because they must be regarded in connection with other truths, newly or differently discerned."¹ Or, put in another way by Canon Glazebrook: "The more thoughtful part of the English-speaking world, dissatisfied with the traditional Christology, which dates from the fourth century, is groping anxiously for some more adequate expression of that faith in Jesus Christ which it shares with fifty past generations."² With these demands it is not necessary for us to quarrel, but we are bound to inquire, firstly, whether it is necessary that they should be made, and in the next place whether

¹ Caillard, *A Living Christianity*, p. 2.

² *Modern Churchman* (Sept. 1921), p. 201.

the answers given by the Modernists are sufficient, for we have the feeling that whatever, if any, their failings may be, the ancient creeds do supply an adequate answer.

I suppose that we are all prepared to accept the position that each generation must have Christ interpreted to them in the language it can understand and in the light of the full knowledge we possess. Our concern is that the truths and ideas preserved in the language we use concerning the Christ shall be perfect. Our quarrel with the Modernist is that his explanations do not preserve those truths, or, at least, are so stated as to seriously imperil them.

Let us bear in mind what is to be explained. It is the Person and Work of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Incarnation and the Atonement. What we demand is that any explanation which is given shall be adequate to explain these two great truths. The Incarnation is the centre of the world's history, and at the heart of the Incarnation lies the Atonement. As Dr. Headlam has said: "If you cut out the idea of the Atonement from the Gospel narrative, you are depriving it of everything which gives it real and logical consistency."¹ For an adequate explanation of the Incarnation, nothing but a declaration that in Christ dwelt all the fullness of the Godhead bodily suffices. That He is God in all that constitutes and is essential to the Divine nature, I quote Dr. Ottley: "The Incarnation was no mere presence of God in a man, no mere mode of mystical indwelling, no mere moral relationship, such as may subsist among friends. It was a real, permanent, indissoluble union of two perfect natures, divine and human; an assumption of manhood into personal unity with a divine being, so that the Godhead employs the manhood as an organ, and wears it as a vesture, so that all the acts and efficacy of the human nature properly belong to the Godhead."² And similarly, for an explanation of the truth of the Incarnation, we need the acceptance of the full belief of the true human nature of our Lord in all that constitutes and is essential to human nature.

What are we offered in the place of this? We are asked, by Mr. Major, Editor of the *Modern Churchman*, if we will "accept the affirmation 'God was in Christ' with the practical recognition in daily life that 'Jesus is Lord' as constituting the irreducible

¹ *Three Sermons on the Atonement*, p. 7.

² *Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 464, Art. "Incarnation."

minimum for Modernist membership in the Church and in the teaching and ministerial offices." ¹ I venture to think that the Unitarian can go as far as this without straining his conscience, and that such a creed is an inadequate statement of the facts and truths of Christ, but I am sure that many Modernists, to speak quite fairly, would say, "this is indeed the minimum." ²

Concerning the reality of the human nature there is no dispute. It is, in their anxiety to make this plain, that the truth of His divine nature suffers. As Mr. Emmet said at the Cambridge Conference: "Drs. Lake and Foakes-Jackson appear to give us the picture of a very commonplace and uninspiring prophet, differing from the prophet of the Liberal Protestant, in that He only taught much what other people had already taught, except for a few original remarks which were either quite untrue or quite unpractical." ³ And his words of criticism are quite justified when he says: "Such a view explains neither the figure of Jesus as given us in the Gospels, nor the impact of Jesus on His age." "We want to be shown," says Canon Scott Holland in criticizing an earlier book of Dr. Kirsopp Lake, "why a certain Personality was overwhelmingly paramount, and we are told that it wasn't." ⁴

With others their belief in the divinity of our Lord would seem to rest upon the fact that all human nature has in it something of the divine, though in Christ this was perfectly manifest. They almost speak as if God was evolved from humanity. Or, to put it in another way, they seem to hover on the verge of a declaration that in all men there is something akin to God. And that in Jesus Christ, the perfect man, there is the fullness of this God-likeness, and His claim to be divine rests upon this fact, and not upon the truth that the divine, eternally existing God assumes human nature in the Incarnation. "The primary and fundamental condition is the fact that the being of God and the being of man are indissolubly interrelated." ⁵ "Man is not merely the creature and plaything of God; that there is a certain community of nature between God and man, that all human minds are reproductions

¹ Editor, *Modern Churchman* (Sept. 1921), p. 200.

² See e.g. Rashdall, *Jesus Human and Divine*.

³ *Modern Churchman*, p. 216. The Conference as a whole seem to have agreed to Mr. Emmet's condemnation of the learned doctors.

⁴ *Creeds and Critics*, p. 29.

⁵ Dr. Bethune Baker, *Modern Churchman*, pp. 292, 299.

'in limited modes' . . . of the Divine Mind, that in all the human thinking there is a reproduction of the Divine thought, and above all, that in the highest ideals which the human conscience recognizes there is a revelation of the ideal eternally present in the Divine Mind—these are the presuppositions under which alone any real meaning can be given to the doctrine"—of the Incarnation.¹ Dr. Rashdall, indeed, sees the possibility of the danger of this line of thought, and safeguards the statement by reminding us that, however, "there is much in human nature which is not divine at all."² And the line of thought does need safeguarding, for that way pantheism lies, and I venture to think it provides us with very insecure ground upon which to build the truth of the essential divinity of Christ. That rests upon other fuller and more secure foundations.

We may admit what is said concerning the "ideal eternally present in the Divine Mind" to be correct, but must not the same statement be made concerning all created things? The universe potentially exists eternally in the Divine Mind, and only in time comes into being, but having been created, in neither its whole or parts do we identify it with the Creator, for though Immanent, He is yet Transcendent. Man is, indeed, we may believe, an "ideal eternally present in the Divine Mind," but not to be thought of, therefore, as Divine or part of the Divine, when as created he takes his place in the universe, other than as we so think of the rest of the universe.³ The Christian faith is not that the ideal human becomes Incarnate in Christ, but that God, in Whom that ideal is eternally present, became so Incarnate. Timeless in His eternal reality as God, in time He comes in the reality of Manhood to be the perfect revelation of God, and the full satisfaction for our sins. So John's words in Revelation xiii. 8, "The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world," may be borne in mind in their connection.

Let me remind you that the sources of our Christology are primarily the Holy Scriptures, both of the Old and New Testaments. I would emphasize this point, for the Old Testament receives rather less than the attention it deserves in this connection, but without the Old Testament much of our Lord's personality would

¹ *Jesus Human and Divine*, pp. 17, 18.

² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³ Cf. A. Fawkes, *Studies in Modernism*. "Christ was perfectly human, not in spite of His being, but precisely because He was divine."

be unintelligible, and the process of God's revelation obscure. I do not at this point lay stress upon Messianic prophecy and so on, but rather upon the history of the development of God's revelation so clearly pointed out by the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, i. 1: "God, Who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by *a Son*." But here we are rather in difficulties with our Modernist friends, and fail to find a common ground of agreement. For them the criticism of the Old Testament has reached the point of "assured results." What these are definitely it is difficult to find out, and seem to vary from time to time, but meanwhile, by processes which do not always commend themselves as scientific, by ignoring the arguments of conservative scholars, by concealing the many times they have had to retrace their steps, they would tell us that our argument, such as it is, when drawn from the Old Testament, must be very much modified by critical conclusions. With regard to the New Testament we are in a similar state. Mr. Major tells us: "Unless, therefore, those who discuss together the theme of 'Christ and the Creeds' have adopted *modern methods* in the study of the New Testament (we do not say *recent conclusions*), no possible agreement can be reached and little good can be done by the discussion."¹ But is not this to claim judgment before trial? The modern methods may not be accepted by us, for the simple reason that we do not feel them to be true or scientific. We seem to be invited to a duel without the choice of weapons or ground. Our opponents choose the weapons that please them, and (shall I say it?) take up their position with their back to the sun! Take as an example of modern methods: "The New Testament remains only the expression of what Jesus had come to mean for the Christians of the first century A.D., and therefore cannot be a final Christology."² Do we accept that? Or shall we say with Loisy: "There does not remain in the Gospel but an echo only, necessarily weakened and rather confused, of the word of Jesus."³ And, of course, where the Synoptics are treated in this fashion the Fourth Gospel is also barred as a source of historical evidence.

¹ *Modern Churchman*, p. 194.

² *Ib.*, p. 306. Rev. R. G. Parsons.

³ Quoted by Fawkes, *Studies in Modernism*, p. 296.

But the wonder of the Gospels remains. And it is this. Presenting, as they do, a Personality unique among the sons of men, they yet are perfectly free from excess, they preserve a balance, and in a marvellous manner give us the picture of the Christ in Whom the writers recognize the twofold nature at once, human and divine. This carries with it the evidence of historical truth. Let me illustrate what I mean by calling to your mind the picture presented by the miracle of quelling the storm on the lake. There you have the Master, physically exhausted and worn by His labours, asleep on the pillow; a perfectly human picture in all its details. Then at the fearful cry of the disciples, the awakening and the "Peace be still," and the great calm as nature obeys its Lord's command. Can you think that such a picture of the human weakness and Divine power could have been painted without a model? Either the humanity or divinity must have been out of proportion if this were the outcome and expression of "what Jesus had come to mean for the Christians of the first century." You only need to read the Apocryphal Gospels to see what an imaginary Christ is supposed to do.

The history of Christology is the history of the endeavour to preserve this balance, and orthodoxy has corresponded to the success of that endeavour. Hereŷy has meant its disturbance, and either, by the disturbance of that balance in the one direction or the other, has imperilled the verities of both natures. And I venture to think that the recognition of the reality of the human nature has depended very much upon the proper recognition of the divine. Had Arius triumphed, for instance, the perfectly true and human figure of the Christ would have disappeared from the Church's sight, and I venture to think that the same peril to the human nature of the Christ exists to-day in some of the semi-Arian presentations of His personality.

That our Lord's was a human life in all its perfection and fullness is plainly stated in the Gospels. He lives and speaks and suffers as one Who, indeed, in the days of His flesh, "learned obedience by the things He suffered." And I think the fullness and reality of His human nature is most manifest by the life of prayer which He lived. For prayer is the expression of the sense of human need and weakness, and of our reliance upon divine strength. That He prayed, I venture to think, makes certain the fact that

He met and overcame all the temptations of our nature by those helps and aids that God in His power bestows in answer to the cry of human weakness. Only with Him the strength perfectly asked and given was perfectly used, and thus, though "tempted in all points like us, as we are," He was "yet without sin."

Of course, when we come to examine the conditions of that life, of "that mystery of Godliness," we are naturally face to face with difficulties which are apparently insurmountable. To the idea of God belongs that of omnipotence, omniscience, and the unceasing, eternal, limitless energy which, bringing all things into being, preserves them in being. To the idea of man there belong contrasts and opposites. To him belong limitations of time and space and understanding. It is of the nature of the sacrifice of love that He accepted these, and whatever else may be understood by His self-emptying (*κενωσις*), the fact of His acceptance of those limitations must be recognized. Says Van Oosterzee: "The Son of God, become truly man, in this condition reveals also His divine attributes only in a human, that is to say, relative and finite, manner. The personal possession of those attributes remains unchanged, just as really as He remains the Logos; but the manifestation and exercise thereof is to a great extent modified, when He Who was in the form of God, in the Incarnation voluntarily divested Himself of that which belonged to Him. In a very sound sense can we thus speak of the self-limitation of the eternal Logos, in consequence of which He, once become man, manifests His glory upon earth, not in an absolute and adequate form, but in a relative and approximate one. The Son of God in Himself was undoubtedly omniscient and omnipotent; but the incarnate Son of God shows clearly enough that He does not, in point of fact, know every contingent circumstance, and that He is limited in a peculiar manner, not, indeed, in the possession of that miraculous power, but yet in the employment thereof."¹

It is necessary, as I have said, to bear this fact of the self-limitation of the Christ in mind, but it is also well to bear in mind, in view of many questions that arise, another fact, and it is this. By the coming of the Christ a new and unique personality is manifested among the sons of men in that He is perfectly sinless. What the effect of a sinless personality may be upon the perception and

¹ *Christian Dogmatism*, p. 514.

knowledge of truth it is difficult for us to say, but I venture to think that the effect is not small, and that the very free statements that have been made concerning our blessed Lord's limitation of knowledge to the exact limits of that of His own day need to be carefully scrutinized.

Bearing in mind the conditions of our Lord's earthly life, Dean Rashdall's statement that He did not claim divinity for Himself¹ is rather beside the mark. In the nature of those conditions it would be impossible to conceive Him in the process of the revelation of God to say baldly, "I am God." But that claim is implicit in all His utterances. "Ye have heard that it was said of them of old time . . . but I say unto you." Here is a consciousness of authority that goes far beyond the human, and I would ask you to bear in mind that the words quoted were spoken in connection with the moral law, the "Ten Commandments." Again, what are we to make of His words, "All things are delivered unto Me of My Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal Him."² Surely this suggests a "consciousness of unique relation towards God," and not merely "the attitude which He wished that all men should adopt towards God,"³ as Dr. Rashdall puts it. In the same way I venture to question whether by applying the term "Son of God" to Himself it is right to say, as Dean Rashdall does, "to Jewish ears this does not imply Godhead."⁴ If I read my Gospels aright, the condemnation of our Lord was only achieved by His enemies when the High Priest put the question, "Art Thou the Christ, the Son of the blessed?" and upon our Lord's confession, "I am," He was condemned for blasphemy. Why, unless they recognized a claim to Deity? The force of this fact seems to be unrecognized by the Modernist.⁵ I cannot think that we are far from the truth when we say that He claimed to be God, and died because of that claim.

The question arises, admitting the perfection of the human personality and the divine in the one Christ, how can we explain the union without losing something of the perfection of one or

¹ *Jesus Human and Divine*, pp. 11 and 37. ² Matt. xi. 27.

³ *Jesus Human and Divine*.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁵ Cf. Peake's *Commentary*, p. 698. But see also *Modern Churchman*, (Sept. 1921), p. 305.

the other of the personalities? I believe that it is a question rather to be asked than answered, and that ultimately it is a truth rather for humble faith than for intellectual understanding, and, in this respect, like to the question of the unity in the Godhead. *That* we cannot understand or give any explanation of, yet we accept it, forced to this by demands stronger than those of our intelligence; the demands of the spiritual nature. And in like measure to explain the perfect union of the two perfect natures is beyond us, but the same demand is felt, strong and insistent, of a spiritual need; the craving of our humanity for union with God, which can only find its satisfaction in the belief that our nature has been assumed by God and linked with His in perfect unity, and through oneness with Christ we are one with God.

There is, indeed, a suggestion put forth by one of the later Greek writers, and stated with much force by Dr. Relton in his *Studies in Christology*, that seems to shed some light upon the problem. I think that it may be briefly summed up thus. In the Godhead there is that which corresponds to our humanity in the image of which man is made. This includes, of course, since it is the perfect humanity, all that we understand by personality. As the greater contains the less, so the personality of the Godhead contains the personality of the manhood, and so they may be conceived of as distinct, yet one. Christ in His Incarnation manifests that which is truly human in God, and the Incarnation expresses not all of the thought of God, but a truth of His eternal being.

Here, of course, we are struggling in the dark waters of speculative thought, but I venture to think that some gleam of light is cast across those waters by the suggestion.

But to refuse to accept because we cannot explain is a mistake which we only seem to make in dealing with religious beliefs, but I think that the recognition of the limitation of human intelligence is the highest wisdom with respect to them. To imagine that human intelligence must be satisfied before any truth can be accepted, and to attempt to explain the mysteries of the Kingdom of God in terms of human reason only, used to be called rationalism, and I am afraid that of some modernism it may be said that the "new modernism is but the old rationalism," however short or long it may be written. Listen to these words: "The

extreme rationalistic school represents, of course, a deliberate pre-determination to reduce every doctrine of revelation, and every element of religious life as exhibited in the Scriptures, within the limits of natural knowledge." ¹ These words seem a very up-to-date description of the Modernist position. They were spoken over forty years ago by a Bampton lecturer, still, we are glad to say, living, and as strong a champion now as then for the faith. I speak of the venerable Dean Wace, whose words they were.

The reasoning of Modernism we may find ourselves sometimes unable to controvert, but its explanations, felt to be inadequate to the faith and experience of the Christian believer, will be surely refuted by that spiritual discernment which is the gift of the indwelling Spirit. It is said that these questions cannot be settled by the old Christian in her cottage with her Bible on her knees. Perhaps this is so of questions of pure scholarship. But the question is not only, or even mainly, that. It is a question that is in the realm of spiritual writers, and here the old lady in the cottage is the equal, and sometimes the superior, of the scholar in his study. Religion is a matter of experience, and the living union of the believing soul with the Christ produces such a result that any explanation of His effect upon the soul is inadequate unless it recognizes in the fullest and most explicit manner in Him a personality perfectly human and perfectly divine, that does not see in Him the fullness of humanity and the fullness of the Godhead.

I have left myself but little space to speak of the Atonement. Properly speaking, I suppose it may be said to be outside the limits of my subject. Yet I feel that a Christology that omits the Atonement is very imperfect. Canon Barnes preached the closing sermon at the Cambridge Conference, and a very beautiful sermon it was. He said: "I am an Evangelical; I cannot call myself a Modernist." He felt, I should imagine, a little doubtful as to some of the things said there. "One or two of the speakers," as he put it, "in discussing subjects where language cannot adequately express feeling, have seemed to doubt whether the Jesus of history was the unique Person in Whom St. Paul and St. John saw the only-begotten Son." May it not be that this is the cause why that Conference seemed, to quote him again, "to avoid

¹ *The Foundation of Faith*, p. 14.

questions concerning reconciliation, redemption, salvation. I regret," he says, "the omission because such matters are central in Christian experience." Thus speaks not only the scholar, but also the believer, and such a statement is welcome from such a source. The Atonement is, indeed, vital in any Christian scheme of belief. The Modernist is often fond of quoting St. Paul's words in 2 Cor. v. 19, "God was in Christ," but they do not complete so often the words of St. Paul, "reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them." The words are vital. If in the first part of the sentence we see the statement of the Incarnation, in the second part there is the statement of its purpose. They cannot be separated. The method of reconciliation was the Cross; the efficacy of it depended upon the reality of the twofold nature of the Christ, human and divine. You cannot explain the Atonement by separating its syllables and speaking of it as, at-one-ment or mind. That explains the effect and not the cause. You cannot abolish the craving for such an act of God's love as the Atonement is by denying the fact of sin. Human nature will still feel the sting of conscience and impatiently reject such a superficial view of life and cry out rather with a saint and apostle, "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?"¹ and will only find peace as with him it can go on to say, "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord."

The charge of the immoral nature of the doctrine which has been urged by some will be seen to fall when we realize that it is "God in Christ" Who bears the load of our sins upon the Cross. "It is His love which is embodied in the sacrifice."² God, against Whom we have sinned, takes our nature that He Himself may bear the burden of its sins; and the one perfect sacrifice owes its efficacy to the perfect union of the human and divine in Christ. Again, reason may ask, "How can these things be?" and find no answer, for here, as in the Incarnation, we try in vain to plumb the depths of God's eternal love.

I have done, feeling that I have dealt very inadequately with the subject. I can only plead the limits of human understanding—and especially my own—and pray that the Lord and Master of our souls may guide us by His Spirit to the fuller knowledge which we crave of "the truth as it is in Jesus."

Rom. vii. 24, 25.

² *Creeds and Critics*, p. 53.