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Faith and Knowledge

IN an issue devoted to the claims of scholarship it is right and proper that some attention should be given to the very real connection between the intellectual and the spiritual in the Christian life. In common with all the great Reformers, the 16th century Anglicans were both scholars and patrons of scholarship. They laboured against great odds, not always with great success, to promote learning amongst the clergy. Their ideal of a learned ministry is set out clearly and forcibly in the well-known (but not so well-heeded) words of the Ordinal: "Will you be diligent . . . in such studies as help to the knowledge of the same (the Scriptures), laying aside the study of the world and the flesh?"

The very fact that these words occur in a service of "ordination" to a spiritual ministry—the cure of souls—shows clearly that scholarship is not an academic and intellectual matter only, but of spiritual interest and value. When we look at the question in the Bible itself, we find that the same thing holds good. There is a wrong kind of learning, a cleverness of the mind which is of no avail when it comes to the knowledge of God. This cleverness is proud. It ministers to the self-will. It blinds to the truth of God. That is why the Saviour can give thanks, "Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent," and why the Apostle can ask, "Where is the wise?" when it is a question of the Divine Wisdom.

I.

The knowledge of God, which is the beginning of theology, comes by simple faith. It depends little upon human faculties, almost exclusively upon the activity of God Himself. But this fact does not mean that there is no room for the exercise of the intellect in the Christian life. All must receive the primary knowledge from God, by revelation. Previous intellectual attainments can contribute little or nothing: they may even be a stumbling-block. But upon the basis of the God-given knowledge each man must go on, advancing in knowledge and understanding by means of the faculties which God has given to him and enlightened by the Holy Spirit. God does not want His people to be a group of wilful ignoramuses. The fact that scholarship does not of itself lead to the knowledge of Christ does not mean that ultimately—except in very exceptional circumstances—there can be a vigorous spiritual life without some degree of scholarship. It is right to say that the simple man may know Christ as well as the learned professor. It is wrong to go on to despise scholarship, denying it its proper place.

What must be done is to make sure that the right kind of knowledge and understanding is pursued. The Apostle Paul constantly exhorts the early converts to grow in wisdom and understanding: doctrinal—the being, the nature, the works of God; ethical—the demands made upon them in their own lives; historical—the way in which God has

called them and led them. But it is a God-centred learning to which he calls them, not any kind of secular intellectual activity. The spiritual value of scholarship depends upon the nature of it. If it is secular, or if it is pursued with secular ends, if it has not as its great aim and object the attainment of a greater knowledge of God, then it may well be that it is ultimately more harmful than profitable. But if it is a scholarship which is grounded and centred in God, which has as its aim the spiritual one of knowing God and advancing in the knowledge of God, then its value is incalculable.

Perhaps one or two examples will help to show how sacred study can and does affect the spiritual life. Personal relations depend to a large extent upon knowledge of the person concerned. Perhaps at a first impression we have a poor opinion of some person. But then we learn of some incident which displays a nobility of character, or we hear of some achievement which testifies to an outstanding ability. Devotion feeds upon knowledge. The more perfect the character concerned, the fuller will love be as knowledge increases. But theology is the gaining of information upon the acts and nature of God, the perfect character, revealed in Jesus Christ. As God is more fully and perfectly known, as His saving acts are learned and understood, so the heart goes out more and more in love to Him, grateful and adoring love. A static understanding means inevitably a static devotion. Of course, the loving acts of God can be "experienced" as well as "understood," so that there can be a measure of spiritual life even where understanding remains small. But surely it is obvious that with fuller understanding the experiences themselves become deeper and richer, and God is known more wonderfully as the God of grace.

II.

That is not the whole story. Faith, too, is strengthened by knowledge and understanding. In the beginning it is, in a sense, a leap in the dark, a reliance upon promise. But fulfilled promises buttress faith; and understanding, although here it is always partial only, gives it substance. Scholarship is also able to defend faith against those attacks of doubt from which no Christian is entirely free. It is, of course, possible to meet doubt in the fabled fashion of the ostrich: obscurantism. But if ignorance is bliss, it is not always wise, and doubt ignored has a habit of avenging itself. Some people, it may be, are so little affected by the doubts which prevail around them that they see no need to combat them, but ordinarily notice has to be taken of them if faith is not to be shaken. In matters of this kind the Christian will do well to combine an earnest desire for truth with a reverent agnosticism, the urge to know with the recognition that full knowledge, the resolution of all mysteries, is beyond his scope. Indeed, it is a common experience that the fuller the scholarship, the deeper the humility. Some of the greatest Christian scholars have had the simplest and humblest faith, not because they have avoided intellectual questions, but because they have thought through them to that point where they could only fall down like Job and confess that they were dust and ashes. There is a learning which puffs up, but there is also a learning which humbles. The one destroys faith in God, the other

deepens and purifies it ; for faith divorced from knowledge can very easily become credulity.

The degree of knowledge attainable by different people varies enormously according to faculty and opportunity. With some a thorough knowledge of the Bible pretty well suffices, and the man who knows the Bible can never be dismissed as an unlearned or uncultured man. But others must go further than this, although the Bible will be their foundation, their point of departure, their rule. Especially is it the duty of those called to the cure of souls to go further. It is their task and privilege to mediate the knowledge which will enable humbler Christians immersed in other occupations to grow in devotion and to be strong in faith. For that reason they are called upon, not literally to abandon all other intellectual pursuits, but to turn all their studies in one way, so that for them at least theology is the queen of the sciences. The minister has not to think only—or chiefly—of his own soul when he decides what time and effort he shall devote to learning. He has to think of those for whom he is responsible. No fervour of spirit can excuse him undertaking his work unprepared.

The true minister ought to be able to lead his people in that understanding of the being and work of God which will call them to a fuller devotion. The true minister ought to be able to protect his people against the insidious inroads of heresy within and secularism without. The true minister ought to be able to point his people to the right ways of life, with all the compelling logic of the Christian ethic. The true minister ought to be able to hold up the lessons of the past—lessons of failure and lessons of victory—so that wrong courses may be avoided and right courses chosen. Most of his flock will not have the time, and some will not have the talent, to go into these matters for themselves. They have the right to expect guidance from him in these things. Ignorance or faltering on his part means instability and confusion on theirs. The same is true with regard to those who are outside the Church as well as those who are within. Perhaps one of the causes of the catastrophic decline in church membership is that the common people cannot trust the clergy either spiritually or intellectually. There is a widespread feeling that science has undermined the Christian faith, and the churches cannot produce ministers who are both eminent intellectually and sound doctrinally to destroy the influence, or at least to counterbalance the influence of the man of science. Once the pulpits of our land can be filled with men who convince both by their evangelical conviction and by their intellectual competence, the tide will begin to flow in the other direction.

III.

Learning is no mere luxury. It is not only a matter of academic disputation. Learning can lose touch with reality in isolated instances, but generally it is in the closest possible touch with reality. Learning as such is not enough, no doubt. It must be learning upon the basis of a genuine faith in Jesus Christ. But learning, or the lack of learning, is intimately bound up with spiritual health or spiritual

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