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The Evangelical Quarterly

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THE MESSAGE OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS FOR TO-DAY

THE Epistle to the Hebrews presents to us some interesting problems in the sphere of introduction and in the sphere of interpretation, but into neither of these spheres do I propose to enter just now. Suffice it to say, with B. B. Warfield, that this Epistle "comes to us like its own Melchizedek, 'without father, without mother, without genealogy', bearing its own independent witness to how Jesus was thought and spoken of by the Christian community in the seventh decade of the first Christian century; or, at least, by a special and very interesting group of Christians living at that time, made up of those Jews who had seen in Jesus the promised Messiah and accepted Him as their longed-for Messiah".

I have no intention at the present moment of suggesting any interpretations, ingenious or otherwise, of the specially difficult passages which occur in this Epistle, passages which have sorely puzzled exegetes from age to age. My intention is a severely practical one, to discover, if we can, the abiding message which this New Testament writing has for the present day.

It may be said that the great theme of the Epistle is that of Christianity as the final religion, the absolute religion. In Christ God has spoken His last word to man, and to that word nothing needs to be added.

The Epistle was evidently written to some group of Jewish Christians, who lived, possibly, somewhere in Italy. Evidently, they were in grave spiritual peril, and the Apostle is most deeply concerned about them. They had been Christians for some time, long enough, indeed, to suggest that by now they ought to have been teachers themselves, but they again need that someone should teach them the A B C of Christian truth (v. 12); they

were still in the infant class, were still children in intelligence, having need of milk, and being incapable of receiving such solid food as the Apostle desires to offer them; they were growing sluggish, and were in danger of being no more imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises (vi. 12). A growing lack of vital interest in spiritual things was manifesting itself among them, and, as a result, some among them had ceased to frequent the Christian meetings for mutual exhortation and edifying (x. 25). They were in danger of casting away their joyful confidence (x. 35).

All that is modern enough. There must be many in all the Churches of to-day who, for various reasons, are in a spiritual condition that is very similar. They need the "word of exhortation" which this Epistle addresses to us: they need its robust and rousing teaching to waken them up, out of their stupor.

The people to whom the Epistle was written were in danger of apostatising from Christ, in danger of being swept from their moorings out across perilous seas, where shipwreck might await them. In view of the greatness, and the final, decisive nature of the revelation of God given in Christ, the Apostle addresses this earnest appeal to his readers: "We ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should drift away from them" (ii. 1).

These people lived, possibly, in Rome, and, it may be, worshipped God in some humble house on some back street of the Imperial City, and some of them, perhaps, were in the habit of contrasting unfavourably their simple mode of worship (what some might call their bare worship) with the stately and imposing worship of the Temple, and they wondered sometimes if they had lost something of value in becoming Christians. No, this writer says, you have something better than Judaism ever gave you.

It has often been pointed out that the word "better" is one of the keywords of this Epistle. Christians are under a better Covenant, one established upon better sacrifices, abounding in better promises, and inspiring a better hope by which we draw nigh unto God. The writer plunges at the very outset right into the heart of his theme, and, as he proceeds to develop that theme, in majestic language and with much subtle reasoning, he indicates how Christ is better than the prophets, better than the angels, better than Moses, better than Joshua, better than the Levitical priests. These priests "were not suffered to

continue by reason of death: but this man, because He continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood. Wherefore He is able to save unto the uttermost those that draw nigh unto God through Him, because He ever liveth to make intercession for them " (vii. 24, 25).

But this Epistle goes further than that. Not merely is Christianity better than Judaism, but Christianity is the best religion conceivable; it is all that religion can ever be.

That thought of the finality of Christianity is deeply imprinted on our minds by the use that is made of the adjective " eternal " in several passages of the Epistle. Christ is the author of an eternal salvation (v. 9), a salvation which secures the Final Perseverance of the " many sons " for whom Christ tasted death, so that they will all without fail reach the " glory " in which the Captain of their Salvation, their Forerunner, now dwells. Christ has obtained " eternal redemption " (ix. 12) not a redemption like that of the Day of Atonement in ancient Israel, which had to be renewed every year, but one which really " finished transgressions and made an end of sins and brought in an everlasting righteousness ". " Every priest *standeth* daily ministering and offering sacrifices, which can never take away sins: but this man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, *sat down* on the right hand of God, from henceforth expecting till His enemies be made His footstool. For by one offering He hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified " (x. 12-14). His one offering reaches the idea towards which the old-time sacrifices strove in vain, and by reaching it has for ever set them aside.

Christ has purchased for us an " eternal inheritance " (ix. 15), that is, not an earthly Canaan, from which we may be exiled, but " the city which hath the foundations, whose builder and maker is God " (xi. 10), the " unravaged, undefiled, unwithering inheritance ", of 1 Peter i. 4. " There everlasting spring abides, and never-withering flowers." Finally, the blood of Christ is " the blood of an eternal covenant " (xiii. 20). The new relation with God, established by Him at infinite cost, is one that can never be disturbed.

" What from Christ the soul can sever,
Bound with everlasting bands ?
Once in Christ, in Christ for ever,
Thus the Eternal Covenant stands."

In all these glowing statements strong emphasis is laid on the fact that what God has done in Christ has the note of finality. God has spoken His last word. Indeed, that conception of absoluteness and finality in everything Christian dominates this Epistle, and we are never far away from that idea in any part of it.

Let us fix our gaze steadfastly on those eternal realities in this epoch of bewildering change. When so many rival ideologies are warring for the mastery of the human heart, let us ask men to listen to what this Epistle has to say to them. It will speak to them in mighty trumpet tones of those eternal, unchangeable truths which will still continue to satisfy the soul of man when Hitler will be remembered only as one remembers a bad dream. Men talk of the "new order" they want to establish and of the "new world" they fain would bring in but we have to tell of the eternal order of God, and of His truth which unchanged has ever stood. What kind of world we shall have to live in when this ghastly conflict is over who can tell, but there is one thing that we do know, that the essential, the deepest needs of man will still be the same and that the Everlasting Gospel will still be there to meet those needs.

James Smetham, the painter, who was an ardent Evangelical believer, in one of his letters writes these words: "I am at present on the Epistle to the Hebrews. The great difference of such a subject from all others is that all the interests of Time and Eternity are wrapped up in it. The scrutiny of a title-deed to £100,000 a year is nothing to it. How should it be? Is there a Christ? Is He the Heir of all things? Was He made flesh? Did He offer the all-perfect sacrifice? Did He supersede the old order of priests? Is He the Mediator of a new and better Covenant? What are the terms of that Covenant? There are no questions like these." "I am astonished, too," Smetham says further, "at the imperative tone of this Epistle, and the element of holy scorn against those who refuse to go into these great questions carefully. The Voice seems to shake the heavens and the earth in order to establish in the hearts of the obedient the kingdom that cannot be moved." What if the Voice, be shaking the heavens and the earth now in order that men may be brought to realise as never before their need of the eternal, of that which shall never be taken away from them?

Our greatest need to-day is a widespread, profound spiritual revival, so that the eternal verities will become central in the

thinking of man, and not international politics or economic reconstruction. We can play about with matters of that kind and remain for ever on the surface of things and never once really grapple with those deeper needs with which the Gospel deals.

Christianity is the final, the absolute religion, because of what Christ is, and because of what Christ has done.

The German scholar Beyschlag, well known at one time at least for his treatise on *New Testament Theology*, endeavoured most laboriously and most unconvincingly to prove the thesis that the pre-existence predicated of Christ in the New Testament is merely an ideal pre-existence, pre-existence as an idea in the mind of God. Of this Epistle he said that the author, "in the naïve way of Biblical realism has personified the Logos". The naïveté of such an oracular pronouncement would be hard to beat, and only illustrates the painful German lack of humour. Our author says nothing about the Logos, and, if he had, it would have been about the personal Logos of the opening verses of the Fourth Gospel; the One of whom he writes is the pre-existent, eternal Son of God.

In his majestic opening paragraph, in sonorous and well-balanced phrases, he announces that in the New Testament era God has spoken to men in One who has all the attributes and the qualifications of a Son, and such a Son as is the effulgence of the glory of God and the exact image of His substance. That seems, Warfield says, "to be only a rich and suggestive way of saying, to put it briefly, that the 'Son', as 'Son', is just God's fellow. He is the repetition of God's glory; the reiteration of His substance. By the 'glory of God' is meant here just the divine nature itself, apprehended in its splendour: and by its 'effulgence' is meant not a reflection, but, so to speak, a reduplication of it. The 'Son' is just God over again in the glory of His majesty. Similarly by the 'substance' of God is meant, not His bare essence, but His whole nature, with all its attributes; and by 'the very image' is meant a correspondence as close as that which the impression gives back of the seal: the 'Son' of God in no single trait differs from God. In a word, what is given to us in the 'Son' is here declared to be God as 'Son' standing over against God as 'Father'".

There is no book of the New Testament that stresses so strongly the true humanity of Our Lord as does this Epistle, but it also contains that exalted doctrine of His Person which

I have just described. It was of the "Son" that God was speaking in the 45th Psalm, when He said: "Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever" (i. 8). "Jesus Christ is yesterday and to-day the same and for ever" (xiii. 8), that is, He is the Eternal Son of Him who says to His people, "I am Jehovah, I change not; therefore, ye sons of Jacob are not consumed" (Mal. iii. 6).

The Epistle, in its exalted doctrine of Christ, is entirely in harmony with the rest of the New Testament, is entirely in harmony with the mind of Our Lord Himself. Not only in the Fourth Gospel, but in the Synoptic Gospels quite as unmistakably, He speaks as only God has the right to speak. Of His utterance in Matt. xi. 27 Warfield says, with good reason, that it is "in some respects the most remarkable in the whole compass of the four Gospels". "All things were delivered unto Me of My Father"—and, in the opinion of many competent exegetes, that seems to describe a pre-temporal act, belonging to the past eternity—"and no one knoweth the Son save the Father; neither doth any know the Father save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son willeth to reveal Him."

Beyond all doubt, Our Lord speaks there as an eternal, Divine Being. "As the Father only can know the Son, so the Son only can know the Father: and others may know the Father only as He is revealed by the Son. That is, not merely is the Son the exclusive revealer of God, but the mutual knowledge of Father and Son is put on what seems very much a par. The Son can be known only by the Father in all that He is, as if His being were infinite and as such inscrutable to the finite intelligence; and His knowledge alone—again as if He were infinite in His attributes—is competent to compass the depths of the Father's infinite being." What Liddon says about Our Lord's words in which He claims to be the Judge of men can be applied here: "the imagination recoils in sheer agony from the task" of seriously regarding such words as the utterance of a created intelligence.

One of the passages in which Our Lord speaks of Himself as the Judge of men is that one which we find at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. To quote some words of D. M. McIntyre, "As he unfolds the commandment, which is exceeding broad, He silently ascends the throne of God, and assumes the judgment of souls: 'Then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from Me, ye that work iniquity' (Matt. vii. 23).

He is not only the Judge of mankind: He is the heaven of the blessed, and absence from Him is hell”.

This Epistle tells us that He came from heaven, and, that, having finished the work given Him to do, He has passed through the heavens, and, in the grandly impressive words of viii. 1, He has sat down “on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens”. That is the Christ of this Epistle, the Christ whose praises are sung in that old hymn, of which “Rabbi” Duncan said that it is “by far the finest fragment of post-apostolic devotion”. “Thou art the King of glory, O Christ. Thou art the Everlasting Son of the Father . . . When Thou hadst overcome the sharpness of death, Thou didst open the kingdom of heaven to all believers. Thou sittest at the right hand of God, in the glory of the Father. We believe that Thou shalt come to be our Judge.”

“Thou didst open the kingdom of heaven to all believers.” That reminds us of this fact, that Christianity is the final, the absolute religion, not only because of what Christ is, but also, and supremely, because of what He has done. The “dogmatic centre” of this Epistle, it has been said, is that verse in the seventh chapter, part of which I have quoted already: “The law made nothing perfect, but the bringing of a better hope did, by which we draw nigh unto God.” Christianity is the religion which proclaims free access to God, and, therefore, it is all that religion can ever be, for it meets the deepest needs of sinful humanity.

Dr. Vos of Princeton, in an article in the *Princeton Theological Review* for July, 1907, says that this Epistle deals manifestly with two great offices of Christ, that of Revealer and that of Priest, and he declares that “it is clear that the author co-ordinates the two”. Side by side, in the opening paragraph, we have the phrase, “God spoke in a Son”, and the phrase, “having made purification of sins”. The greater part of the Epistle (v. i-x. 18) is occupied with a rich exposition of that second phrase.

Warfield has remarked that this Epistle is the one book of the New Testament of which “it has proved impossible for even the hardest to deny that Christ’s death is presented in it as a sacrifice”. Man needs a Revealer, but he needs, far more, a Redeemer.

It seems evident that the writer of this Epistle desires to suggest to us that a firm grasp of the doctrine of the Priesthood of Christ leads Christians out of spiritual infancy into

spiritual maturity. Having a great High Priest, who is passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession (iv. 14); having a sympathising High Priest, let us draw near to the throne of grace (iv. 16); "having boldness to enter . . . and having a Great High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near . . . in full assurance of *faith*. . . . Let us hold fast the confession of our *hope* (as the correct reading there possibly is) . . . and let us consider one another to provoke unto *love* and good works " (x. 19-24). "Draw near " (x. 22). "Draw not back " (x. 39). "Let us press on unto perfection " (vi. 1). Preaching which summons the people of God to attend to such matters can never grow out-of-date.

This Epistle lingers lovingly, one might almost say, on such words as "same " and "continue " and "remainest " and "unchangeable ". "Thou art the same, and Thy years shall not fail," and by "two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie ", the promise of God and His oath, strong consolation is ministered to us in a world which sometimes seems to be sinking back into chaos. We have fled for refuge to take hold of the hope set before us, and that hope we have as an anchor of the soul both sure and steadfast, or, as it has been put, an anchor which will neither break nor drag, and which entereth in within the veil whither as Forerunner on our behalf Jesus has entered, who has been made a High Priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek (vi. 19, 20).

The Priest-King who is over the House of God has His Kingship broad-based upon His priestly work, and since, in that priestly work, sin has been atoned for and all the dark forces of evil have been conquered, His Kingship is certain so to guide and control the events of history as that one day all His enemies shall be put under His feet, in final and eternal subjection. "Wherefore we, receiving a Kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace whereby we may serve God acceptably, with reverence and godly fear, for our God is a consuming fire " (xii. 28, 29). And the very next words are: "Let brotherly love continue." That, too, is something that will outlast the fleeting kingdoms of earth, for it is a spiritual treasure which belongs to the Kingdom which is eternal.

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