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# CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

## Its significance to the believer. Its usefulness to the lay teacher

### I. INTRODUCTION

One of the chief mainstays of the Church of Christ down through the years has been her rich heritage of Christian doctrine. Unfortunately the trend in recent years to topical preaching in our pulpits and the dropping of catechetical instruction in our Sunday Schools has meant that much of that wealth has been lost to the rising generation. Coupled with this has been an emphasis on the voluntary and emotional in personal experience that has displaced any consciousness of the loss that has been suffered. An indication of the extent of this condition is the bewilderment so often evinced in the minds of the young when doctrinal matters are touched upon; bewilderment as to what is meant by doctrine and its place among the means of grace. It is out of a profound conviction that a sound knowledge of Christian doctrine, be it only of an elementary nature, provides the requisite stability for proper growth in grace, and is not only absolutely essential to any who would engage in Christian work but is the surest and quickest aid to the proper exposition of Scripture by the lay speaker and Sunday School teacher, that this article, by a layman, is written.

Occasionally we do see the young eyes light up with some comprehension of "the breadth, and length, and depth, and height . . . of the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge",<sup>1</sup> and such expression of delight makes us desire the more to see all bewilderment swept away. We are less afraid of the introduction of diverse views than of the absence of those elements which are necessary if one is to "stand fast in the faith . . . strong",<sup>2</sup> and able "to give an answer to every man that asketh . . . a reason of the hope that is in us".<sup>3</sup>

All of this, of course, presupposes that the "Christian" for whom we urge an interest in doctrine is a "new man . . . renewed in knowledge after the image of Him that created him".<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Eph. iii. 18 f.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. xvi. 13.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Peter iii. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Col. iii. 10.

We fully realize that the most conclusive arguments in these matters, much less the presentation in these pages, cannot avail unless the Holy Spirit transmits the thoughts to the mind He has prepared. Therefore we pray that "He who opens our eyes to discern the beams of that celestial light which shines in the Scripture, may also correct our taste to discern the divine savor of that spiritual food."<sup>1</sup>

## II. REVELATION

Before we consider the place of Christian doctrine we must have some idea of the construction or method of Scripture. What is the Bible? Why was it given in its particular form? What is the essential difference between its various parts? Why cannot we turn to a summary or a certain chapter in Holy Writ which will condense for us all we need to know and forever eliminate the necessity of man-made creeds?

We shall try to find the answer to these questions by first going back to man's earliest days. In the Garden of Eden man had no need of Scripture. He was privileged to enjoy direct fellowship with his Creator and (within his capacities) to know God as a man learns to know his intimate friend. Sin and the Fall, however, completely changed that relationship. God is rightly offended with man and in the purity of His holiness and in righteousness cannot continue the intimacy of the Garden. Man, on his part, has been sadly changed; not only is he no longer congenial to God but also is no longer competent to receive such intimacy and personal knowledge of God. A fair picture of man apart from grace is a creature with reason perverted, his will biased toward evil, his conscience unreliable, his affections set on sinful things, his soul bereft of supernatural gifts, his best works at least negatively sinful and his social relations sinful and hence unsatisfying.

How shall God reveal Himself or talk to such a creature, tell him of his condition and impart the promise of salvation? First of all God talks to man through nature. It, too, is sadly affected by man's sin but still, in the beautiful words of the Belgic Confession, speaks "by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe which is before our eyes as a most elegant book wherein all creatures, great and small, are as

<sup>1</sup> *The Confession of the Waldenses, A.D. 1655.*

so many characters leading us to contemplate the invisible things of God, namely His eternal power and Godhead". The only difficulty with this "natural revelation" is that man's apostasy is so developed that while the voice of nature leaves him inexcusable before God it is incapable of bringing him "to a knowledge of God and His will which is necessary unto salvation".<sup>1</sup>

God, therefore, in mercy set in motion a "special revelation" of words and acts in dealing with the children of men that would impart the required knowledge of Himself. Beginning with the very names by which He identifies Himself He connotes what He is to men. Of necessity then in the circumstances, this special revelation was commenced on a remote basis. Just as when a personal friendship has been severed any resumption of correspondence is likely to be distant and formal, so it was in this case but even more so by reason of the disparity of the persons involved. Furthermore man is so far from a right attitude towards his Creator that he has no desire for peace with God except upon outrageous terms. Indeed his arrogance and pride are such that without any encouragement he would, if it were possible, seat himself on the very throne of the Almighty. Hence we read of the "fencing" of the appearances of God to His ancient people. Accordingly, over a period of some four thousand years, God moved toward man in act and word. First as a rightly offended Creator yet still mindful of His creatures; then revealing Himself as a Covenant God binding Himself to redeem man; then as a Friend, as a Father and finally as a Lover, a Husband to Israel, even though all the while man has been moving farther away, even to the point where the "chosen people", they who should have been the "Bride", could only be described by the analogy of the adulteress.

This revelation was given in a twofold manner: by a series of central progressive objective acts which stand for all time, are meaningful for all believers and hence require no repetition; and by means of an inner subjective revelation to the individual man which of necessity must be repeated in each case. Not only are these objective acts employed in a progressive unfolding of the content of revelation but the mode of the unfolding is itself progressive, as it is seen in the early manifestations or

<sup>1</sup> *The Philadelphia Confession: Of the Holy Scriptures.*

theophanies with their outward impact on the senses; as it comes in the inward prophetic inspiration, and finally as it comes by Christ Jesus, who verily was God with us.

Paralleling this objective work and drawing upon it but exhibiting a certain freedom of accomplishment is the subjective internal redemptive work which is in fact the commencement of the restoration of the "image of God" in man and which is ever at the behest of the great Potter who has power indeed over the clay.

This picture then gives us the answer to our first two questions. The Bible is the record of these acts and words of God's special revelation. Its particular form is dictated by the "progressiveness" of the revelation; the sequence and character of God's acts and words which it records are enriched with overtones of understanding wrought by the Holy Spirit in the consciousness of the saints which in their amplitude rise like mountain peaks even to the piercing of the clouds that still enshrouded the purposes of the Eternal One.

In the New Testament, however, we discover an additional phenomenon. Our Lord Jesus Christ appears as the culmination of Divine Revelation. He says: "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father";<sup>1</sup> "If ye had known Me, ye should have known My Father also".<sup>2</sup> He flashed across the horizon of the age a dazzling meteor, displaying in the passage of three short years infinitely more of God than had been manifested in the preceding millenniums. Indeed His brilliance was such as to obscure much of the "light" of that age, but after the manner of an earlier manifestation which was "cloud and darkness to the Egyptians but light by night to Israel",<sup>3</sup> he was the Light of life. He had many things to say, but His disciples were incapable of receiving them in their transcendent brilliance. Implicit in His teaching is all that is necessary for us until the enlightenment of the resurrection morn, but those things that He has yet to say and those things implied which must for us be made explicit are to be the work of the Holy Spirit to say and to unfold, using as His instruments the authors of the New Testament canon. Hence there is a progressiveness

<sup>1</sup> John xiv. 9.

<sup>2</sup> John xiv. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Exod. xiv. 20.

in the New Testament teaching. Taking then the progressiveness of revelation and the progress of doctrine together we have the answer to our third question as to the essential difference between the various parts of Scripture.

Thus while we find the promise of redemption in the maternal covenant of Genesis iii. 15, it is rather to the Gospels that we turn to learn of the atonement made by the Seed of the woman. It is to the Epistles that we turn for revelation of the fulness of Christ's salvation, for instruction in the way of life and for knowledge of the life hereafter. It is to Exodus that we turn for a knowledge of the circumstances of the giving of the Law. It is from the New Testament that we learn the purpose of the Law, "our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ".<sup>1</sup> Conversely it is from the New Testament record of Calvary that we learn of the price of our redemption but it is from the Old Testament that we see the sovereign purposes of God and the faithfulness of Jehovah moving to that end. It is from the whole body of Scripture rightly gathered up and apprehended that we begin to conceive of the glories of the Triune God and not the least of these, His grace toward us His fallen creatures. It is with the "gathering up" and the "apprehending" that doctrine is concerned.

Finally, as to the reason why Scripture includes no simple summary, we should remember first that the truth is inherently rich and complex, because God is so Himself.<sup>2</sup> Further it has pleased Him to enjoin upon us to search the Scriptures,<sup>3</sup> for they were written for our learning,<sup>4</sup> that we might praise Him for His mighty acts<sup>5</sup> and for His goodness and His wonderful works to the children of men.<sup>6</sup>

Our doctrine, therefore, can never take the place of Scripture whose every word, every connective, is most significant and must stand; but it can, instead, be of inestimable value in Bible study and the understanding and retaining of its teaching.

<sup>1</sup> Gal. iii. 24.

<sup>2</sup> Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.), p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> John v. 39.

<sup>4</sup> Rom. xv. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Psalm cl. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Psalm cvii. 8.

## III. DOCTRINE

(1) *What is it?*

Dr. John Murray has given us one of the most succinct definitions of doctrine: "Right notions of Scriptural truth."<sup>1</sup> Louis Berkhof has well said that for the Reformers dogmas were: "Divine truths clearly revealed in the Word of God."<sup>2</sup> Griffith Thomas was perhaps more academic: "The fundamental truths of revelation arranged in systematic form."<sup>3</sup> Rainy was picturesque: "the human echo to the Divine voice—the human response to the Divine message."<sup>4</sup> Orr described it as "a work of the human spirit operating on the matter furnished to faith in divine revelation."<sup>5</sup> Forsyth very aptly said it is "final revelation in germinal statement—the church's grasp (of revelation) "<sup>6</sup>

Doctrine gathers up the implicit teaching of the acts of God in His dealings with men as well as the plain words of Scripture. It is both word and fact. It is "that which is expressly set down in Scripture" and "that which by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture."<sup>7</sup> Unlike revelation, doctrine is incomplete for, as Schaff says, "Faith must be in every point entire and firm: never finished but always susceptible of further development."<sup>8</sup> Revelation then in nature and in Scripture is a work of God. Doctrine, however, consists of right notions of these truths as they are apprehended by the believer and to this extent is a human work, but since these notions can never be rightly apprehended except by the work of the Holy Spirit, doctrine is also, to this extent, a divine work.

Because this is a non-technical article we use the word "doctrine" loosely. We should perhaps explain that "doctrine" is sometimes designated as "dogma" when it has received

<sup>1</sup> Dr. John Murray, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, Sermon delivered in Toronto.

<sup>2</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans), Introductory Volume, p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Principles of Theology*, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> R. Rainy, quoted by Louis Berkhof, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma*, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> P. T. Forsyth, quoted by Berkhof, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>7</sup> *Westminster Confession: Of the Holy Scriptures.*

<sup>8</sup> Philip Schaff, quoted by Van Oosterzee, *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 69.

the sanction of some ecclesiastical body, and is upheld by the authority of that body. Again, however, the two are considered synonymous by scholars like Auguste Lecerf on the premise that the authority of Scripture renders to the truths derived from it the full status of dogma. Other variations of these designations have been held by different scholars.

“Symbols” is another term that may confuse the uninitiated. This is the name for statements of faith as they appear in Christian creeds.

A further complication is the term “Dogmatics”. This is the science of the self-consistency of doctrine. To know a few of the vital doctrines of Christianity is indeed a great blessing but to be able to hold the doctrines of the Church in their right relationships is to be conversant with the very queen of sciences. So Van Oosterzee’s definition: “Dogmatics is the expression of the consciousness of belief as it has actually and for the present moment developed itself, by the light of the Gospel and in the bosom of the Church, to a defined and clearly measurable height.”<sup>1</sup>

## (2) *The History of Doctrine*

It was not until nearly the third century that doctrine in the form of systematically stated and accepted forms (creeds) made its appearance in the Church. These early years were largely taken up with certain aspects of Christology. It was not until the sixteenth century that the doctrine of the Atonement was adequately and analytically stated. Many of our important doctrines were centuries in development.

Doctrinal statements in many instances came to birth as the Church found it necessary to refute error. The last high point in dogmatics was the time of the Reformation. John Calvin’s system of doctrine has never been improved upon although some of his individual points have been more fully expressed by a small handful of theologians. But if there was no systematic arrangement of doctrine at the time of the early Church, the truths on which such systems were later built were already being apprehended and affirmed.

Perhaps the first statements of doctrine in the New Testament are found in the statement of Simeon, “Mine eyes have seen Thy salvation”;<sup>2</sup> in the confession of Peter, “Thou art the

<sup>1</sup> Van Oosterzee, *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 69.

<sup>2</sup> Luke ii. 30.



Christ, the Son of the living God", to which Jesus replied: "Blessed art thou . . . for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but My Father which is in heaven . . . and upon this rock [i.e. this doctrine] I will build My church";<sup>1</sup> in the confession of Martha, "Yea, Lord: I believe that Thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world";<sup>2</sup> and in the confession of Thomas, "My Lord and my God."<sup>3</sup>

Certainly by the time of Paul, in the words of Warfield:

The church has been founded and in it throbs the pulse of a vigorous life. The Gospel has been embraced and lived: it has been trusted and not found wanting: and the souls that have found its blessedness have had time to frame its precious truths into formulas—formulas which have embedded themselves in the hearts of the whole congregation, have been beaten there into shape as the deeper emotions of redeemed souls have played round them, and have emerged again suffused with feelings which they have awakened and satisfied and moulded into that balanced and rhythmic form which is the hallmark of utterances that came really out of the living and throbbing hearts of the people.<sup>4</sup>

So Paul declares, "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."<sup>5</sup> "These faithful sayings [were a] body of utterances in which the essence of the Gospel has been crystallized by those who have tested and seen its preciousness."<sup>6</sup> They were the very beginning of the Church's doctrine.

The earliest records<sup>7</sup> of the baptism of believers show that the candidate was not asked to repeat a portion of Scripture but rather to state the irreducible content of the revelation of Scripture and his belief in the same. As he stepped down into the water he was asked by his pastor: "Do you believe in God the Father Almighty?" He answered, "Yes" and was immersed. He was asked: "Do you believe in Jesus Christ His only begotten Son, our Lord?" He answered "Yes" and was immersed again. He was asked: "Do you believe in the

<sup>1</sup> Matt. xvi. 16 ff.

<sup>2</sup> John xi. 27.

<sup>3</sup> John xx. 28.

<sup>4</sup> B. B. Warfield, *The Power of God unto Salvation*, p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Tim. i. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Warfield, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>7</sup> See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (Longmans, 1950); C. A. Briggs, *Theological Symbolics*; J. R. Lumby, *The History of the Creeds*.

Holy Spirit?" He answered "Yes", and was immersed for the third time.

As time goes on these questions are expanded to include the phrases concerning Christ, "who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried and rose on the third day", and in the third confession: "the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the resurrection of the flesh, the life everlasting."

Then about the third century we find the candidate required to state these doctrines himself in turn. And we find catechetical instruction of all believers in the doctrines of the Church before baptism and admission to membership. Thus the Church progressed in ability to express the teachings of the Bible and the believer in ability to express his faith. Thus were both fortified against heresy.

Shedd says: "The history of Christian doctrine is the account of the expansion which revealed truth has obtained, through endeavour of the Church universal to understand its meaning and to evince its self-consistence in opposition to the attacks and objections of scepticism."<sup>1</sup>

#### IV. THE PRACTICAL VALUE OF DOCTRINE

##### (1) *It is Essential to Knowledge.*

Perhaps one says: "I have accepted Christ as my Saviour, I am trying to serve Him. Christianity is for me a life, I feel no necessity for doctrine or dogmas let alone dogmatics." Berkhof says, "The assertion often heard in our day, that Christianity is not a doctrine but a life, may have a rather pious sound . . . but [it] is after all a dangerous falsehood. It is only by a proper understanding and a believing acceptance of the message of the Gospel, that men are brought to the necessary self-surrender to Christ in faith, and are made partakers of the new life in the Spirit. The reception of that life is . . . conditioned by knowledge."<sup>2</sup>

Jesus says, "This is life eternal, *that they should know Thee the only true God, and Him whom Thou didst send, even Jesus Christ.*"<sup>3</sup> Paul says, "God would have all men to be saved,

<sup>1</sup> W. G. T. Shedd, *History of Christian Doctrine*, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Louis Berkhof, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> John xvii. 3.

and come to *the knowledge* of the truth";<sup>1</sup> he represents as an aim that all believers may "attain unto the unity of the faith, and of the *knowledge* of the Son of God, unto a fullgrown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ".<sup>2</sup> Peter says, "His divine power hath granted unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the *knowledge* of Him that called us by His own glory and virtue."<sup>3</sup>

Berkhof goes on to say:

Participation in the life of Christianity is everywhere in the New Testament made conditional on faith in Christ as He has revealed Himself, and this naturally includes knowledge of the redemptive facts in Scripture. Christians must have a proper understanding of the significance of these facts; and if they are to unite in faith, must also arrive at some unitary conviction and expression of the truth.

Shedd has said:

History has shown that Christianity has soon lapsed into pantheism and other heresies when all logical methods have been rejected and feelings and intuitions substituted for clear discrimination and conceptions.<sup>4</sup>

And Van Oosterzee says:

The Christian faith *impels* indeed to the knowledge of things which are given to us of God in Christ and conducts thereto. What through faith we understand is by no means the fruit of a bare supposing, or a highly probably conjecturing, a being almost certain: the believer knows not only THAT, but also truly WHAT, and upon what ground he believes. The eye of faith must in every domain observe, compare, combine the facts of revelation—faith is here, in the fullest sense the *root and principle of knowledge according to the apostle's word*<sup>5</sup>—"We have believed and know that Thou art the Holy One of God."<sup>6</sup>

Are we not justified in affirming here that the believing and knowing of the apostles was conditioned on some understanding of the teaching of Old Testament Scripture? And did not Jesus say: "Search the Scriptures, for they are they which testify of Me?"<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 1 Tim. ii. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Eph. iv. 13.

<sup>3</sup> 2 Peter i. 3.

<sup>4</sup> W. G. T. Shedd, *History of Christian Doctrine*.

<sup>5</sup> Van Oosterzee, *Christian Dogmatics*, pp. 231-236.

<sup>6</sup> John vi. 69.

<sup>7</sup> John v. 39.

Shedd says very pertinently:

There is no trustworthy religious experience that is not grounded in the perception of religious doctrine. Christian dogma is the support and nutriment of all genuine Christian life.<sup>1</sup>

Lecerf says:

Reformed Christianity . . . attaches value to emotion and enthusiasm only in so far as these sentiments are provoked by religious truth, recognized as such by a divine promise, the meaning of which has been grasped and the divine character verified intellectually.

Here then is a yardstick for the right measurement of all ecstatic experience and for our Christian walk and life.

Religion then for us is not purely an affair of sentiment, still less sentimentalism. To our knowledge of sensorial and rational origin, it adds supra-sensorial and supra-rational knowledge, concerning that which God wills that we should think of Him, in order that we may glorify Him and find in Him our happiness and our "unique consolation in life and death".<sup>2</sup>

Calvin said:

The seat of religious knowledge is the heart rather than the head. But in order that it may descend into the heart and set the will in motion, it must in the first place be received in the mind and understood by it. God is not known at all by mere imagination, but as He manifests Himself within our hearts by His Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

What can we say of the practical value of Christian doctrine to the ordinary Christian who has little time for reading the Bible and limited opportunities for enlarging his knowledge of it? Certainly we hold that some knowledge of the self-consistency of revealed truth cannot help but bolster our faith and, as Lecerf has suggested, the study of doctrine may well bring unexpected solutions to intellectual difficulties which press heavily on the certitude of faith. Then, too, with Van Oosterzee, we believe that it may be the very means of increasing spiritual life.

How, indeed, shall we begin to attain unto the knowledge of Christ except as we are able to gather up in our minds the record of Him as He is foretold by the prophets, as He Himself lived and spoke and as the Holy Spirit takes of the things of Christ

<sup>1</sup> W. G. T. Shedd, *History of Christian Doctrine*.

<sup>2</sup> A. Lecerf, *An Introduction to Reformed Dogmatics* (Lutterworth Press), p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes*.

and reveals them through the apostles? And can this knowledge not best be apprehended and held in a form approximating to the "faithful sayings" of the saints? Then, too, there is real comfort and consolation for the believer as he identifies each experience in life and in humility marks each advancement in grace by means of a doctrinal yardstick whose every graduation is based on Scriptural truths.

And how the glories of our Lord shine out and the attributes of our God bring us to our knees in adoration and praise when the many facets of doctrinal truth become apparent to us! This should become clear when we consider that until we understand something of God's holiness we have no real conception of our sin; but having in grace been given a glimpse of its exceeding sinfulness we then need an understanding of Christ's righteousness made over to us, and for abiding assurance we must have the justice of God satisfied—yes, more—in a forensic act, God Himself pronouncing us justified. Then the brilliance of the gems of the Church is manifest and we begin to understand in some measure "what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us"; and the glorious things that are spoken of the Zion to which we hasten are no less than our beloved Christian doctrine. Such in any event was the conviction of Luther when he declared "Doctrine is Heaven".

And if, finally, some brother who is assailed with doubts comes to us for help (and the greatest of saints have been so assailed), which shall we suppose will be the more helpful to him: to tell him to "have faith" or to tell him how Christ Jesus *has* pleaded a perfect case on his behalf and that he *is* justified, for it is Christ that died, yea rather is risen again?<sup>1</sup> A sound knowledge of the doctrine of justification will be of inestimable help in such a case.

## (2) *The Value of Doctrine in Exposition and Teaching.*

And now we pass to a brief consideration of the value of knowledge of Christian doctrine in exposition of the Word.

The Sunday School worker, the lay teacher to-day does not lack "outlines" sufficient for his needs. But if he is to be a "workman not needing to be ashamed, (ever) cutting straight the Word of truth",<sup>2</sup> he dare not "wander up and down but

<sup>1</sup> Rom. viii. 34.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Tim. ii. 15, Lenski's *Commentary* (The Wartburg Press).

(must) pursue a certain path, and so attain to the end to which the Holy Spirit invites him".<sup>1</sup> If he is to receive his Lord's "well-done" he cannot afford to be superficial.

Calvin has said that he who understands the principal matters of Christian philosophy will make more progress in the school of God in one day than any other person in three months, inasmuch as he, in the great measure, knows to what he should refer each sentence, and has a rule by which to test whatever is presented to him.<sup>2</sup> As present-day evidence of this truth we have the experience of Dr. E. C. Merrick of Cochabamba Bible College in Bolivia. Faced with the necessity of accepting students of the most elementary literary training he has found it expedient to utilize a catechism of the Christian tenets which he has especially prepared for such students. Very significantly other Evangelical groups working in Bolivia have adopted Dr. Merrick's work.

It goes without saying that Calvin had no thought of trying to fit each verse of Scripture into a man-made pigeon-hole or of checking Scripture with our notions concerning it; rather by gathering up passages that specifically bear on a given truth the richness of God's revelation becomes more apparent to us and with a rule to check, not Scripture, but our interpretation of it, we are then on a basis for sound progress in study and authoritative exposition.

Where would commerce, the arts, and science be if they had not those rules and formulae that guide all their motions? And can we conceive that the same Spirit that has given wisdom to men in the use of mathematical tables, chemical formulae and the like will be any less precise in equipping those whom He has endowed with His greatest gift—that of teaching the Word? If our civilization to a large extent depends on the fact that one and one make two, can we not by analogy be sure that the same importance must be attached to the addition of things revealed in the spiritual realm? But to illustrate: suppose the Sunday School lesson is concerned with the glorious story of the Advent and we are reading Luke i. 35 where the angel says to Mary: "That holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God." There is a danger that we might erroneously

<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes* (preface to 1st French edition, 1545).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

understand that Christ was made or constituted the Son of God in time and therefore was not the Son of God from all eternity. But we shall have no difficulty here if we can gather up all the Scriptures on this matter and thus have some knowledge of the Eternal Sonship of our blessed Lord.

Suppose, again, that we are endeavouring to teach something of the nature of God. It is relatively easy to dwell on the fact that God is love. Perhaps, too, Isaiah's declaration of the trisagion of the seraphim in their antiphonal song, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of Hosts", has impressed us with God's holiness and we feel quite safe in teaching that. But supposing then the familiar question is raised: "How can a holy God who is love allow . . .?" Again, we shall have no difficulty if we can hold in proper balance God's righteousness and justice which rise to the same perfection as His holiness and love. Rather we shall be able to speak with a new depth and clarity of the glories of our God and in contrast the exceeding sinfulness of man's sin.

Again, we prepare to teach an Easter lesson and the atrocities of this present age give to our minds fresh sharpness of the incomparable sufferings of Christ. But we have not begun to understand those sufferings until we in some measure understand our Lord's nature; and though we penetrate, if it were possible, to the very core of His sufferings, and then all we have to present is a bleeding corpse, how we have robbed Him! What about the glorious Victor of Golgotha's brow, who was at once Sacrifice and High Priest even to the raising of the sacrificial knife and the presenting of His own blood at the altar and indeed sprinkling the people in full atonement of their sins? We shall not be chargeable with wrong emphasis of the revealed truth if we know something not only of His "passive" obedience but also of His mighty "active" obedience.

Finally, we shall be able to get away from "teacher's manuals" and be able to draw on all the wealth of expository literature available to us regardless of the denominational affiliation or individual quirks of the writers because we have, with Calvin, a rule by which to test all things presented to us.<sup>1</sup> We shall remain consistent in our teaching because we are able to hold the various aspects of the truth in right relationship.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

### (3) *Its Value as a Means of Sustaining the Church.*

We have already observed in the words of Berkhof that if Christians are to meet together as a Church and unite in faith they must arrive at some unitary conviction and expression of the truth. Christian doctrine provides the necessary basis for such concord.

But what happens later on when other views are presented or creep in unawares? Shedd shows us the real value of doctrine in such cases: "Power of statement is power of argument. It precludes misrepresentation. It corrects mis-statements."<sup>1</sup> Then too, just as we give praise for all the saints who from their labours rest, we have a responsibility to generations yet unborn: "our doctrine can be a worthy sign and instrument to remind future generations also of the truth once known."<sup>2</sup>

But you ask, "Can doctrine assist in the growth of the Church, can it be said in any way to aid in those things which are indeed identified as the fruit of the Spirit?" Shedd again:

The scientific expansion of a single doctrine results in the formation of a particular type of Christian piety: which again shows itself in active missionary enterprise, and the spread of Christianity through great masses of heathen population. . . . The construction of a creed oftentimes shapes the whole external history of a people.<sup>3</sup>

And Orr adds:

The Reformation age was marked by its productivity in creeds . . . [these creeds] have stood as witnesses even in times of greatest declension . . . having served as bulwarks against assault and disintegration: have formed a rallying ground for faith in times of its revival.<sup>4</sup>

*Catholicity* says:

Where the elements of dogma, and the patterns of life moulded by it, have become weakened, the way is opened for pragmatist, nationalistic and man-centred ideas of religion to worm their way in. And they do.<sup>5</sup>

In this fast-moving scientific age is it not possible that God may yet break out more truth from His sacred Word? And how shall we receive and understand such enlightenment except as

<sup>1</sup> W. G. T. Shedd, *History of Christian Doctrine*, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God*, p. 184.

<sup>3</sup> W. G. T. Shedd, *History of Christian Doctrine*, p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma*, pp. 280 f.

<sup>5</sup> *Catholicity: A Report presented to the Archbishop of Canterbury* (The Dacre Press, 1947).



we have assimilated present knowledge to a clearly definable quantity and quality?

Perhaps we are approaching now the fulfilment of Daniel's prophecy, "And thou Daniel, preserve the vision and seal the book till the time of the end: many shall diligently peruse it, and knowledge shall be increased."<sup>1</sup>

In the light of such possibility and the sure word of prophecy we have a responsibility in our Churches and Sunday Schools to prepare our young people for participation in such a glorious prospect. Could we covet more than that out of our Christian young people of to-day might come a Wessel, a Luther, a Calvin, a Warfield or a Martin, bringing to the Church, the bride of Christ, a gift of deeper insight into the excellencies of her Beloved? Thus may the Church return to the highest concept of the Reformation, first and foremost in all things glorifying God.

*Toronto.*

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<sup>1</sup> Dan. xii. 4, Leupold's *Commentary* (The Wartburg Press).