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978-1-107-50574-2- Truth: An Essay in Moral Reconstruction

Sir Charles Walston (Waldstein)

Excerpt

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I

“That they all may be one.” Jn xvii, 21.¹

In the great prayer which has this as its chief petition a distinction is drawn between “the world” and the men and women in it who, in any age, are brought to see in Jesus the manifestation of the one true GOD of all the world—His name, His characteristics (*v.* 6, ἐφανερώσά σου τὸ ὄνομα). It is an ideal for Christians among themselves “that they all may be one”—“even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us . . . that they may be one, even as we are one”.

That the prayer as we have it is the evangelist’s own composition is clear, but that it is a true reflexion of the mind of Jesus on this point we cannot doubt. It is worth noting that by the time the prayer was recorded there was need to proclaim the ideal as persuasively as possible: the evangelist had in view a need of the young society. The wonder of the new experience of which Jesus was the centre had already found different kinds of expression. Different descriptions

¹ A sermon preached in St Andrew’s, Ashley Place, at the Annual Meeting of the Modern Churchman’s Union on Wednesday, May 30, 1934.

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of it which could crystallize into historical facts and theological definitions were current. Good practices with religious intention were becoming conventions or sacred institutions. Convenient arrangements for the decent order of affairs in the various groups of believers were having the authority of apostles or of the Lord Himself claimed for them. Already there were many groups; ecclesiastical organizations and systems of doctrine were in the making.

As for doctrine, in the very act of writing his Gospel the evangelist was himself putting out a new interpretation of the significance of Jesus. The oneness which he thought was in accordance with his Master's mind clearly allowed of various ways of conceiving Him: it did not demand one only formulation—a single creed. And as to organization, in the allegory of the Good Shepherd, which deals in story form with the same conception of unity, it is not one fold but one flock that the one shepherd wants. Those that are his, given to him by the Father, may be distributed in many folds on earth—yea, even in heaven, in the Father's house "there are many mansions" waiting to receive them—while yet they all may be one.

We know, indeed, that Jerome by his change of *una grex* to *unum ovile* in the Latin version which became the Bible of the Western Church, and Augustine

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by his use of the mistranslation in his conflict with some early puritan schismatics, have a heavy responsibility for the “one-fold” theory that prevailed in the West. But already before their time uniformity of creed, with technical definitions that only specialists can understand, had come, and uniformity of order was already regarded as the divinely appointed channel through which alone a true religion here and eternal life hereafter could be obtained.

As we look back on those far-off times, the early years and on through the middle ages, it may well seem to us that only so in all the changing conditions of the world of those days—only so could Christianity have survived and kept such kind of identity as it undoubtedly has preserved. At all events it was the “one-fold” theory that gave us the continuity we have, both outward and visible and inward and spiritual. It gave us, first, as our criterion of the Christian faith the New Testament—that great treasury of different points of view from which we can always quote some text wherewith to confound our opponents, till they quote another for us to be confounded in turn. It gave us our glorious heritage of Christian literature in which, in every age, I suppose, we can find something that makes us feel our spiritual kinship. However far forward we have moved today, whatever ideas of the past we have discarded

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with growing knowledge of the world that is for the moment our world and has always been God's world—of all the pain and travail and adventure of which we are the outcome—yet as we read the Christian literature of almost any previous age, bizarre and strange and uncongenial as so much of it is, we feel that we are in the same religious tradition, lawful heirs and trustees of it.

To get to know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou didst send.

Other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

...who loved me and gave himself for me.

To be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.

Thou, O God, didst make us for thyself, and the heart of man is restless till it finds rest in thee.

Rock of ages, cleft for me,
 Let me hide myself in thee.

These are notes that are re-echoed all down the ages, and where they are silent we miss a characteristic unitive Christian experience. It is not mere sentimental emotion but the fine flower of mind and heart in personal expression.

When we pass beyond description like this to

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reasoned doctrines and definitions, of course we come to what is not unitive but divisive.

The results of the one-fold theory in the formulation of order and explanation have been the disruptions and disunions that have set Christian so-called against Christian all the world over. And it is because this same theory seems still to possess the official mind of the Churches of Rome and of England that recent conversations and discussions about re-union are watched by the rank and file of all the English communions concerned with indifference or disdain and resentment. The kind of re-union that seems to be in view is based on a false conception of unity. It is the ecclesiastical mind that must be converted, if the mind of Christ is ever to rule in the churches of Christendom. How the call of the Christ comes to us to-day—*μετανοεῖτε* all ye Christian ecclesiastics, clerical and lay alike. Get a new point of view. Must ye for ever, in these matters, be tithing mint and anise and cummin?

I suppose we should want to answer, But O Master! Master of the things of the spirit, the abiding things of worth, must we not still pay heed to these things, for we are still on the plane of this world? Is it not true, “On earth the broken arc, In heaven the perfect round”? In Thine own little band of twelve was there not organization, an inner circle of three (Peter

and James and John, who all had ideas of their own), and one with a money-bag, the business man of the band who wanted to make a public success of Thy cause? Surely it *need not* have been just he who betrayed Thee? Must ecclesiastical statesmanship always involve betrayal?

We cannot help it. Creeds and institutions we must have, and systems of doctrine to answer, however lamely, the questions of that spirit within us by which alone we are human but which we believe is also the “candle of the Lord”. Only when it is well trained and instructed can we avoid “profane and idle babblings” in our discourse of high things. We know it is “in his heart” that the Christian must “sanctify Christ as Lord”, but he is also bidden to be ready always to give a reasoned account concerning the hope that is in him (I Pet. iii, 15). I do not think he can do this to-day, any more than he could seven or seventeen centuries ago, by a selection of bits of description from the New Testament. Something more reasoned than that seems to me to be required in our present environment of thought and knowledge and our search for a coherent conception of human experience as it is spread out before us to-day.

For my own part, at least in the statement of my creed, I cannot let go the great findings of the past in

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the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity. I do not mean the popular conceptions of them in terms of a sudden miraculous intrusion from outside or of three individual centres of consciousness. These conceptions I suppose we all regard as modes of valuation that are out of date, or examples of the high mythology dependent on human analogies with which Religion gives, as it were, flesh and blood to its otherwise dumb convictions. And we should add that, in so doing, in the case of these doctrines it testifies to the fact that they are based on actual happenings on this homely earth of ours and the actual experience of men and women like ourselves.

But the fundamental idea of Incarnation, as it can be presented to-day in the light of our view of evolutionary, epigenetic, process, and the idea of the Trinity as our Christian philosophers have portrayed it, seem to me to define the lines along which we reach the true interpretation of human life and history. We may recognize some kind of Christian sentiment and aspiration, some kind of Christian direction of life, where these ideas are wanting. But if there be a theology that excludes them, or even ignores them as indifferent, I at least cannot deem it a "Christian" theology or believe that it could in itself suggest the Christian conception of man and the world and God, and so direct us to that fulfilment of ourselves in all

our relations with one another that our old theologies call the redemption of ourselves and the world.

. . . flesh that I seek
 In the Godhead. I seek and I find it.
 nor soul helps flesh
 More now, than flesh helps soul.

That the human is the organ of the divine; that the flesh, the material, is the means of expression of the soul, the spiritual; that the eternal is realized in and through the temporal, the one only in the many and the many only in the one, unity in diversity and diversity in unity—these ideas, of which our doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity are the classical expression, are achievements of the human spirit in vital connexion with early Christian experience that has been continuous to this moment. They must, I think, remain as the very core of our Christian Creed. It is failure to uphold them that has led to the “profane babblings” and the -isms of the past and the present.

Yet surely we ought to have learnt by now that of all the detailed schemes of doctrine, as of all the forms of order, that have been devised no one can be binding on all Christians. In our own Church of England we have gone farther than this. We know that even within a particular fold, a particular Church, variant conceptions of its institutions and widely different

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interpretations of its formularies and doctrines have existed and can exist. Ever since the Reformation—that age of spiritual giants and watchful statesmen—it has been so. To keep us both Catholic and Protestant was the aim of our sixteenth-century divines. Our new Catholics of to-day dislike the word Protestant, but I do not believe that their leaders really have a narrower aim. In any case, as far as we can discern the genius of the Church of England and the religious tradition of the English people, it will never be confined in any narrower conception of ecclesiastical order and institutions than our Reformation settlement reflects. Rather it will seek a still wider catholicity to embrace its world-wide dispersion and the many other races whose special contribution to the interpretation of the Gospel it seems to be its destiny to welcome and honour with its own.

The new revelation of knowledge, of the world and the Bible and the beginnings of the Christian religion, has already spread its light among ourselves. The older ones of us here could point to landmarks and crises in its course of not much more than seventy years. I recall to-day one of the last of these crises, just twenty years ago. The new number of *Theology* which came to me yesterday reminds me of it. A great leader of the Church flung down a grave, if somewhat petulant, challenge to the methods of study pursued to-day

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wherever Truth is the aim. There was much talk about the “historical facts of the Creed”, the “literal” and the “legal” construction of its clauses, and a mixture of literal and symbolical interpretation. A new phrase appeared, the “religious construction”, which could be applied to all clauses alike; and it was claimed that in such religious construction only could continuity of Christian faith be found and maintained. To-day, as far as my own experience goes, it is only in such religious construction of our Creeds that educated men and women have any interest.

So in these great matters of the re-interpretation of ancient creeds, of free historical and scientific enquiry, and of refusal to be tied by old beliefs, our fold has shewn itself to be one with expanding walls. And it is the peculiar concern of “modern” Churchmen, of all generations and of all schools, to see to it that the walls never close in on them in these respects. They will do so always, of course, with the “sweet reasonableness” which is the mark of Christian strength and the “meekness and godly fear” of a good conscience. I suppose that means with courtesy because they are sure of their ground, keeping their tempers, even when their opponents “furiously rage together” and “imagine a vain thing”. And they will do so in full confidence that, however far short they fall in other respects, in this they are true to their Master’s ideal—