

## VITAL THEOLOGY.

BY HERMON F. BELL.

THE old structure must be razed ere the new can be erected. Changes in theology have been so fundamental that to-day there must be a large amount of destructive work done. The end has not been reached by Biblical criticism. It is in theology itself that discussion is needed. In the November number of *The Open Court* the writer outlined "A Criticism of Modern Theology," mainly negative in tone, a denial of the prevailing theology of the present. No man loves scepticism. Doubt does not nerve us for action. Let a positive statement follow the criticism. But especially let it be emphasized over and over again, that before we can build upon the solid rock all the imaginary, the unreal, the traditional, must be swept away. The positive statement that follows comes not before, but after rejection of Jesus, the Bible and the name of Christian, as these are commonly accepted even by liberals.

Nor is the writer satisfied with that Unitarianism which predominates. To point out its defects I refer to an article in the February *Open Court*. Be it said, however, first of all, that Unitarianism has the greatest opportunity of the time. By its tradition it is untrammelled; it is supposed to have no creed to bind its growing life; from it is expected truth and progress and light. To be sure, the difficulties are great. But when all is said its lack of achievement is the theological failure of the age. And what but failure can result when it hesitates to be consistent in denial and glories in its lack of zeal for a positive faith?

Unitarians in practice do hold the Bible pre-eminent—not because of its present power but for historical reasons, because of its past influence and for want of a better book. Not one of these reasons is positive or vital—not because of what it is—but because they have nothing else. And as for Jesus, the Unitarian ideal is to unbuild the "faith of Jesus." This expression is taken from Mr.

Foote's article, but it is a school of thought that I am criticising. Unitarianism does so aim; witness such books as *Jesus Christ and the Social Question*, or *The Character of Jesus Christ* by F. G. Peabody—representatively Unitarian. It is one of the anomalies of theology to find that body which puts forward so constantly its belief in the progress of mankind upward and onward forever, proclaiming the faith of a man who lived and died 1900 years ago as the ideal for the present.

What Jesus believed or taught is not final; it is indeed well to study this and to get the best picture we can of the character of Jesus. The objection raised is this: while Unitarians discuss and proclaim the character of Jesus and His teaching, they say comparatively little about the character of God and His relation to human society. These are the fundamental questions.

"The theology of the coming age," writes Rev. Mr. Foote, "will be vastly different from that of traditional Christianity, but it promises, in the first place, to be distinctively Christian in that it will be based upon the teaching of Jesus, and in the second place to be thoroughly rationalistic, accepting truth as the only authority and the theory of evolution as applicable to religious life as well as to the world of nature." From this statement the writer dissents in part; the measure and nature of his dissent may be learned from the remainder of this article, which is a positive statement of vital theology.

"It is well said that in every sense a man's religion is the chief fact in regard to him. By religion I do not mean here the church creed which he professes, the articles of faith which he will sign and in words or otherwise assent to, not this wholly, in many cases not this at all. This is not what I call religion, this profession and assertion, which is often only a profession and assertion from the outworks, from the mere argumentative region of him, if even so deep as that. But the thing a man does practically believe (and this is often enough without asserting it even to himself, much less to others) the thing a man does practically lay to heart and know for certain concerning his vital relations to the mysterious universe and his duty and destiny there,—that is in all cases the primary thing for him and creatively determines all the rest. That is his religion."—Carlyle.

Every man must have his own theology, his own religion. This explains why that Unitarianism which aims to produce the faith of Jesus is so ineffectual. Jesus, we are told, taught "with authority and not as the scribes." This was because he proclaimed no faith

of men of ages past but what he had experienced and knew. Ever since that time those who have produced lasting results have proclaimed their own faith. But a criticism occurs to some one. You say the faith of Jesus is inadequate and then put forward your own faith. Is not this to put yourself forward as more of an authority than Jesus? Just so. Experience and wisdom come with years. The world is older to-day than it has ever been before. The theologian to-day has all the past to draw from. Ought not his theology to be more adequate than any preceding one, provided, of course, that he assimilates the contribution of all the ages?

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Without further preliminary I state my own theology. Where shall we start? Where must I start except with myself? *I am thinking*, said Descartes, and this has become the starting point of modern philosophy. I know myself as thinking, feeling, willing,—but I have through it all a feeling of absolute dependence. I need no argument to prove it. Dependent upon what? Upon whom? Here does religion begin—in our every breath we are dependent. Upon what, upon whom? Upon something within and yet not ourselves. This something, this Spirit, I will call God. The fact of dependence is an ultimate fact. The nature of the spirit upon whom we are dependent is, however, open to long discussion.

In my daily life I have to do with persons and with things—they are external—they are outside of me. But they cannot be entirely foreign to me else I could not know them. Recall your epistemology; what is your theory of knowledge? The objective becomes known to us only as we make it subjective. But how can the objective become subjective? And surely to be known it must so become,—unless all is mere subjectivity anyway, no external reality at all.

This is an article on theology, hence I pass over these philosophical questions with the briefest discussion possible. The objective can become subjective only because it is already and always subjective to that power, that spirit, upon whom we depend. So we go out of ourselves and find that which is deepest within us—scientific form of the old truth,—*He that loseth his life saveth it*. Would you be wiser than all, keep your knowledge to yourself; would you be richer than all, bury your gold; would you be stronger than all, waste not your energy;—we all know the folly of such advice. Rather, if you would know a science, or a language, teach it to somebody else; would you increase in wealth, ever spend in invest-

ment; the athlete becomes such through fatigue and wearisome exercise. Would you know yourself, know others, study their thoughts and words and works. But all the objective must be made subjective, else the result is no more beneficial than unassimilated, undigested food. The faith of Jesus must be no longer his faith but our faith; the zeal of Paul must become our zeal; the equanimity of Socrates likewise must become yours and mine; the struggles of Augustine and his rest found in God, if they remain foreign to us, help us not.

Let us look back over the way thus far traveled. The primary fact with us all is that *we are*; and it is *dependent* that *we are*. Constantly we are reaching out of ourselves to external objects and persons which we mysteriously grasp and make our own. This we are able to do because that something, that power, that spirit upon which we are dependent is that upon which they also are dependent. Thus, that which is objective to us we can yet make subjective because it is subjective to that spirit within and above us upon whom we depend. Unless this is so our knowledge is no knowledge. The fact of dependence is the primary fact of life. In our hours of solitude and meditation we are aware of a spirit not our own; in our hours of busiest life it is still upon a spirit not ourselves that we are dependent.

Since we are all dependent upon a spirit not ourselves, absolutely dependent, it is the important question of life (to say nothing of its being fundamental in theology) what is and what ought to be our relation to that power. The question of God is first and last and always the all important one. Every one must agree upon this. Those who say we can know nothing about him, those who say he lived once in human form in Galilee, and those who give any other answer whatsoever, must all agree that the question is of primary importance. If this is so it seems strange indeed that any who do not believe that Jesus was God should put the proclamation of the faith of that man as the great mission of the church to-day. To me it seems like giving the hungry soul a stone. He comes asking for God and he is given a man. He comes saying, "Show me the Father." We show him Jesus and say, "This is not the Father, but let it suffice you."

God. What do we know about God?—This is the question. Even as I know myself as dependent and grasping objects with the embrace of my consciousness, so I know with all the surety with which I know anything at all, that there is a Being upon whom I am dependent and who is everywhere the ground and source of all my

universe. And how much needed is emphasis upon this fact to-day—for it is a fact, not a conjecture. Liberal churches have little power because they have lost the sense of the reality of God; they make the Fatherhood of God merely a background for the Brotherhood of man; and the oldtime theology has whatever power it has, not because of its unscientific notions and many errors, but because it has not lost the perspective and put man first, God second.

Recurring to our question, "What do we know about God?" this is to be answered largely by asking another question, Where do we learn of God? We learn of God at first hand by actual experience and relation with him. In all our lives we are constantly meeting that Spirit upon whom we depend. Hence our knowledge of God differs one from another as our experience differs; the larger the experience, the larger the knowledge. This is why we ought to know more about God to-day than Jesus did. It must, however, be borne in mind that only as we assimilate knowledge does it become our own. It is true, then, that in a very real sense every man has his own God. But we are able without fear of contradiction to maintain the unity of God and that this God who is one is eternal, omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent.

From the unity of our own self-conscious life, we are forced to believe in the unity of that Spirit upon whom we depend. If God is not one, there is more than one universe. No man knows more than one.

Eternity is unity of time. Apart from God no time exists.

Omnipresence is unity of space—there is no place where God is not.

Omniscience is unity of knowledge. We know objects not immediately but mediately. God's knowledge is immediate,—that of self-consciousness. We know immediately only in the present, here and now. With such immediacy does God know all things in all time and in all places.

Omnipotence is unity of power. God is the source of law. There is for him no external authority. All God's law is self-imposed law.

Thus far we have taken only the preliminary steps. I would emphasize again and again, however, that this is not theory but reality;—that I can be sure and do know with all positiveness, not as faith but as knowledge, that there is a power, a spirit, one in time, space, knowledge and power, in whom my life is grounded and in whose universe I live. Upon this power I am absolutely dependent.

Turning again to my own experience, I find moral attributes which I would ascribe to this power; such are justice, righteousness, holiness, mercy, love, and every other virtue. But how about intemperance, anger, lust, malice, envy and all the vices? The problem of evil in our own lives and in the world confronts us. We are not able with the same assurance as before to ascribe the moral attributes to God, i. e., not a matter of knowledge. The problem of evil from a philosophical standpoint is among the most difficult of problems. Hence no attempt at its discussion is here made. I simply state my own belief. I believe in the perfect justice and righteousness and purity and mercy and love of that Spirit whom henceforth we call God. This is a belief not without grounds; in myself I find these qualities and in others I see them, but never in their perfection. Yet whence comes the ideal. Its presence carries a certain weight of evidence as to its reality. Do not refute this argument by confusion of idea and ideal. I could not from myself get the ideal of perfection, for I do not find perfection there, or in the world about me.

Every theology must meet the test of human need. It must answer that ever recurring question of which the old form was "What must I do to be saved?" We put it, Where and how can we get salvation, i. e., How can we become what we ought to be? The Unitarian says salvation is by character, an absurd statement,—as absurd as it would be if I should answer some poor, wandering, lost child who asked me how he could find the way home, "You can get there by being there." Saved by character,—but how get a good character when we have a bad one? Again is God left out of account. It is assumed that we of ourselves can become true and holy. The fact is we are always saved by the grace of God. What do we mean by this? The ideal is from God. It is not from ourselves that we have a desire for a better life or that we behold the vision of what we ought to be. Whatever be the secondary means of grace, the ultimate source is God. From Him we receive not only the ideal but strength to attain it. The standing miracle of the ages is the fact of an inexhaustible supply of power. We can have what we will take, as our faith so is the gift. Psychology and theology alike teach salvation by faith.

Evolution must be reckoned with in all our thinking, but Darwinian and moral evolution are as far removed as the East from the West. In Darwinian evolution, there is struggle for existence, the weak perish, the strong survive through the death of the weak. Progress is exceedingly slow; only through long ages does a slight

advance take place. In moral evolution, there is struggle, not for existence, but struggle for righteousness, the weak survive, being made strong out of weakness; if any perish it is the strong for the weak; progress may be exceedingly rapid. This is not theory but fact. What is the religious struggle but for righteousness? All history tells us of this struggle, its pages are filled with tales of heroes, of cowards made valiant, the martyr rolls are covered with the names of the strong who died for the weak, and that progress may be rapid needs no argument. A man who is traveling east needs scarcely a second in which to wheel about westward. In as little time may a sinner turn from evil to good. There is no denial of this.

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Belief in God and belief in prayer go hand in hand. In harmony with the vital theology thus far outlined in the present article, there are three distinct elements to be noted in prayer.

1. We do pray—every deep desire finds expression in some form of prayer when we are thoroughly conscious of the presence of God pervading our life. The relation between ourselves and God is so close, so literally and actually do we live, move and have our being in Him that our every ardent wish for better things does come as a true prayer. Thus we pray for strength to withstand temptation, for wisdom, for the coming of His Kingdom. But to every such prayer, I seem always to hear the answer, *I have given you strength, work out your own salvation.* And so

2. to labor is to pray. To meet every circumstance and event of life as it comes and to do our best, constantly seeking reverently to be guided by all our experience is to trust God and to follow the guidance of Him from whom all events come. To do our best in dependence upon God is as truly prayer as is the expression of the lip or the secret whisper of the heart. The religious man, the one who believes in the perfection of God and who dares to live in such belief and trust, lives a life of prayer. He is conscious of his continuous need of God, and to Him his soul ever reaches out. And so

3. We must ever come back to our dependence upon God and in prayer, acknowledge that whatever be our striving, we cannot of ourselves answer our prayer or govern the results of our efforts—but our helpless souls do hang on him.

Take an illustration to explain this threefold aspect of prayer. We pray for strength to do the right and be what God means us to be, "to be saved," as the old phrase has it. The answer seems ever to come, "Why are you kneeling here before me? Rise and be the

man that you ought to be, do the right, answer your own prayer," and so we commence to pray by living. But do we accomplish anything by our own strength? It is God alone that must bless our striving. He, and He alone, must save.

The nurture of the religious life is naturally suggested by the subject of prayer. Aside from prayer, which is communion with God within, there is reading of God's Word and fellowship with the people of God. Needless to say, by Word of God we do not mean the Bible of the Christian. We mean all the deepest and best, all the enduring of the world's literature. Liberals who raise aloft the Christian Bible as the one book never tire of speaking of it as the literature of the Hebrew people. Yes, answer those who stand with me; but we are heirs of all the ages, we are citizens of the world, none less than the enduring literature of the world shall be our Bible. To speak of such as "God's Word," is no figure of speech, nor will we hesitate to stand by our belief in its divine inspiration.

Holy men of old spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost, says the Christian. We say likewise. But to be moved by the Holy Ghost is not something so unusual or unnatural as has been supposed. The Holy Ghost is God, the indwelling Spirit. He speaks to all who listen. He speaks through all our experience. Those who have had the largest and best experience of God, who have sought and found him, they have spoken as they were moved by the Spirit. Every true word, every enduring message is divinely inspired. The canon of our Scriptures is never closed, for to close the canon is to shut the gate of our temple to God Himself.

Let no man reproach me with taking away any man's Bible. Those who stand with me are the ones who ought to rise up in strength and to Christians say, "You shall not take from us God's Word and hand us in lieu thereof a closed book, a few letters and sermons, some history, a few hymns and proverbs. We will not be content with less than all we can use." The test of the canon is that which endures, endures by finding an answer in the lives of those who read. God, speaking through others, finds an answer in God within. Our religious life can attain its fullness only by constant use of God's Word. Here we have spread out before us the results of the whole world's experience and knowledge of God. All is ready for us, but to make it really our own we must live it over, learning from their mistakes and successes alike, completing and filling up their knowledge of God.

But for the best results, the religious life must also be nurtured

by fellowship with those of like aims and purposes at the present time. Hence churches, their place and necessity.

Needless to argue upon this point. But a few observations are not out of place as to the bond of union. Shall it be a creed or a covenant, or what shall it be? Certainly a church ought not to be select or restrictive, it then becomes a club or society, not a church. The true church is all-embracing, comprehensive, and would have none outside. Surely no creed ought to be such as will bar a man out.

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The charge against Christianity is twofold, that it rests upon unreality, the deity of Jesus, and that consequently it is exclusive. Such theology as I have been insistent upon takes reality for its corner stone,—not intellectual truth but the very nature of things. Hence it asks not for acceptance of any name or uniform, any symbol or book. It seeks not to enforce or persuade unity, but to declare and make known what is. The Christian missionary would carry to the ends of the earth his Jesus and ask allegiance and surrender to him. Very different is the course I would pursue. And surely, surely, we should be for this reason the more zealous, the more large-minded, the more far-seeking—but it is not to bring them to allegiance to any man of some particular time or place in history, but first of all to bring to their attention the fact of their relation to God, and as already repeated, the doctrine of God rests not upon conjecture but upon reality. Then the appeal is for faith, not about matters of fact—content of knowledge, but faith in choice.

The common creed of the church universal, may it more and more clearly become none else than in substance this: I believe in the perfect righteousness and justice and holiness and mercy and wisdom and love of God, and I dare to accept this belief with my whole heart and soul and make the supreme choice of God for my Saviour and my King, for my Friend above all Friends.

The Chinaman can accept this without ever having heard of Palestine. At the same time it is a duty and privilege of the strong in faith and rich in opportunity to freely give as they have freely received. All things are ours; to attain the largest life we must receive from all humanity the results of its life and experience.

So, then, our favored land has peculiar responsibility for the conversion of the world, but we have also much to learn from those whom the Christian calls the heathen. I used the word conversion. Explanation is needed. By it I mean conscious acceptance of a per-

fect God for our Saviour. He is our Father, our King, our Friend. We are already members of His Household, and His Kingdom; we are, everybody is, dwelling under His care and living by His grace. We need no adoption of Sonship, but only to accept His Fatherhood.

Finally the expression of the religious life is loving service in bringing the world to God through fellowship with Him in His redemptive work. I dare to believe and live in the belief that God is perfect. He then sorrows in all our sorrows, suffers in all our suffering, and ever seeks to bring the world to Himself through His at-one-ment of love and mercy which does make us to know His goodness and His greatness and fills us with desire to be like Himself, and He helps us so to become. The life of faith means, then, not a life of ease or of pleasure, but of heroic, earnest, never ending giving of self.

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One question which is usually dealt with in theology is thus far omitted here, namely that of immortality. What can I hope for? Needless to say Christian eschatology is discredited, yet the human heart does desire the strength and comfort of Heaven. The future, however, must remain among things hoped for—it belongs to faith, not to knowledge. It is not to be used as a motive for conversion or an incentive to righteousness. Righteousness must be demanded on its own ground, for its own sake. The one reason why we should seek salvation, is that we may be like God, be what we ought to be, and that, regardless of the future or the present.

The question of immortality, after all, does not primarily concern us. To be right with God is our concern. The question of immortality is thus to be brought into relation with our belief in God. I dare to believe in the perfection of God. I may think this implies immortality, or, again, there may be grounds for doubting it. I certainly am able to form no adequate or satisfactory conception of another life, but what of that? My concern is that I may ever rest in God and trust Him at all times. To Him there is no past, no future, but an eternal present. To Him I give my life. To know Him and have fellowship with Him is for me life eternal. It is all of life. God is the Lord of life. Belief in immortality must be based not upon legends of the past, but upon belief in a perfect God.

In conclusion, the writer offers no apology for leaving the beaten track of theological discussion. Theology will one day again be *queen of the sciences*, its rightful place, for when we center our

thought where our experience is centered, in God, then all science, all life becomes sacred. The astronomer is not studying the work of another than God. Any conflict between science and theology is absurd. True theology uses the result of the various sciences, it inspires them, it synthesizes and interprets their fragmentary and scattered results in their relation to life.

One word more by way of final summary. The orthodox Christian identifies God and the historic Jesus of Nazareth. This identification is becoming every day more impossible intellectually, and practically also. Surely such identification is a great error. There is no such identity in reality. Either one of two courses may be taken by those who agree that such identity is absolutely disproven. God and Jesus are not the same. The liberals generally agree with this. They say this is so, we hold to Jesus, he shall be central, to proclaim his faith is our task. My whole criticism summed up in a word is against the supreme choice of Jesus and comparative neglect of God. As for me, I choose God.