

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

appetites, instincts, and the intellectual powers, understanding, fancy, memory.

These powers, both animal and intellectual, which constitute us sons of Adam so many living souls, are not themselves the seat of our immortality; they are doomed to decay; the eye shall lose its lustre, the limbs their strength, the passions their fervour, the mind its grasp. It is not from what we inherit from Adam that our bodies shall be glorified, for he was made a "living soul," but it is from what we hold from Christ that we shall be glorified, for he was made a "quickening spirit." As by our union with Adam we fade, we die, we sink under the earth, so by virtue of our union with Christ we live, we rise again, now in the spirit and hereafter in the body. We become fellows of that holy society and citizens of that Divine commonwealth which is founded and established in the heavens: out of which heavens shall He one day descend, who shall transfigure the bodies of His faithful followers, of all who have repented of their sins, of all in whom the empire of the spirit dominates and regulates the province of the soul, who having risen by faith to the life spiritual, hope to rise still higher, even to the life immortal, all by virtue of their membership in Christ.

T. S. EVANS.

*THE AIM, IMPORTANCE, DIFFICULTIES, AND
BEST METHOD, OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY.*

THIRD PAPER.

OUR search for the unseen realities around and above us has now reached an historical stage.

We have heard in the whispers of our own hearts and in the moral judgments of our fellow-men what seem to

be echoes of the voice of a Supreme Judge: in the universe around us we have detected, as we think, the footprints of a Creator: and in the inequality of moral retribution in the present life we have seen a glimmer of a life beyond the grave. While pondering these things, Christianity, as a great moral and social fact, claimed our attention: and, tracing Christianity to its source, we found in the first century of our era a moral and spiritual impulse which stands alone as the one great turning-point in the history of our race. This unique impulse is attributed by all Christians and in all Christian literature to one unique Person. To investigate this impulse, and to learn all we can about this Person, are the tasks now before us.

The method of investigation which I shall suggest is one which all men use when searching for matters of fact which have not come under their own immediate observation. We will seek for witnesses who can give evidence about the matter in question, examine their credentials, and estimate their trustworthiness; and accept as facts only such conclusions as are forced upon us by the evidence which our witnesses afford.

Holding a place absolutely unique in the literature of Christianity and of the world, we find a volume, or rather a library of small volumes, professing for the most part to have been written by immediate disciples of Christ. To these documents we naturally turn for information about the Founder of the Christian Church.

Our first work is to determine the authorship, or at least the early date, of the documents themselves. The first five books of the New Testament are anonymous. We will therefore, since the authorship of an anonymous work is a complicated problem, pass over these for the moment in favour of the thirteen letters which follow, bearing the name of Paul, the illustrious Apostle of the Gentiles. Each of these Epistles we find accepted as

genuine, without a shadow of doubt, in places widely separated, before the close of the second century. And a variety of evidence, external and internal, has convinced all scholars, even those differing about almost everything else in the New Testament, that at least the first four of these Epistles are genuine works of St. Paul. This earliest step in our historical research belongs to the department of New Testament INTRODUCTION.

That our copies of St. Paul's Epistles present, within narrow and well-defined limits, the actual words he wrote, is made quite certain by the science of TEXTUAL CRITICISM.

We have now a secure standpoint from which to view the Author of Christianity. In the writings of the most conspicuous of His early followers, in the words and thoughts of St. Paul, we shall hear a re-echo of the words, and see a reflection of the face, of the Great Teacher.

With this in view, we shall endeavour to trace the line of thought of each Epistle. The difficulty we shall find in following their closely interwoven arguments will prompt a careful study of the language in which the Apostle wrote. And, since all human language is an outgrowth of the mind of man, we shall be led to study language as a whole and the essential relation between human thought and the words in which it finds expression. Thus grammar and philology will lend their aid to systematic theology, and will become departments of sacred scholarship.

With St. Paul's Epistles we shall compare the discourses attributed to him in the Book of Acts. We shall thus have a new and altogether independent witness touching the teaching and the thought of the Apostle.

It will soon become evident to us that St. Paul's conception of the Gospel and of Christ was no mere aggregate of ideas, but was a living growth in which all details

were developed from a few indissolubly connected root-ideas. Growing out of these root-ideas we find various partial conceptions of the Gospel, some of them peculiar to St. Paul, conceptions which we can understand only by comparing them each with the others and by tracing all to these root-ideas. Indeed so peculiar are some of these secondary conceptions, and so closely interwoven are they with the entire thought of the Apostle, that, unless we keep them in view, very many of his arguments and of his practical applications of the Gospel will be utterly unintelligible to us. When therefore, by a preliminary study of the Epistles, we have reproduced in some measure the writer's conception of the Gospel and of Christ, we shall find that this reproduced conception will shed further light on the Epistles from which it was derived. Just so the generalisations of natural science explain to us the phenomena from which they were derived.

As examples of conceptions of the Gospel peculiar to St. Paul, I may mention Justification by Faith; the believer's crucifixion, burial, resurrection, and enthronement with Christ; and the Church viewed as the body of Christ. Underlying these peculiar developments as their only explanation, and underlying his entire teaching and assuming a multitude of forms, are the great fundamental doctrines of Salvation by Faith, Salvation through the Death of Christ, and the Holy Spirit dwelling in believers as the animating principle of a new life. And underlying these fundamental doctrines of the Gospel, as their inseparable basis, we find throughout every Epistle, St. Paul's conception of Christ as One infinitely raised above all mankind, and marked out as such by His resurrection from the dead.

The above are adduced merely as illustrations of what I here advocate as the best method of theological research.

The student will frame by induction from the writings of St. Paul, his own reproduction of the Apostle's conception of the Gospel and of Christ.

This reproduced conception will claim to be accepted as historical fact. We shall be compelled to believe that St. Paul confidently held it. And for so remarkable a phenomenon we shall seek a sufficient cause. We shall ask whence these doctrines were derived; and how Paul came to bow with reverence so profound in the presence of a fellow-countryman of his own day. It is true that this profound reverence is fully explained by his confident belief that Christ had triumphed over death. But this explanation only forces upon us with greater urgency the question how St. Paul came to believe, with a confidence which became the mainspring of a life of heroic benevolence, that Christ rose from the dead.

Before attempting to answer these questions, we notice that already they who have trodden the path just marked out have made definite progress in their search for information about Christ and His teaching. They have gained a clear and harmonious view of Him and of the Gospel as these appeared to a contemporary of highest character and occupying a most conspicuous position in the early Church. We seek eagerly for other evidence from other witnesses, to confirm or to modify the picture already obtained.

The Gospel and First Epistle commonly attributed to John, the beloved disciple, present to us another and very definite conception of Christ and His teaching. To determine the actual authorship of these documents, belongs to the department of New Testament INTRODUCTION. But their confident reception by all Christian writers in countries widely separated by sea and land, without a trace of doubt, before the end of the second century, is indisputable proof that they are not later than the age im-

mediately succeeding that of the apostles. The Gospel is specially valuable as being a biography of Christ Himself, and containing long discourses professedly from His lips. The Epistle is for the more part an exposition of these discourses. We have thus abundant materials for a second picture of very early date, of Christ and the Gospel. These materials must be used in the manner described above for the writings of St. Paul.

The total difference in thought and expression between the works now before us and the Epistles of St. Paul, assures us that we have here an altogether independent witness touching the life and teaching of Christ. We hasten to compare his testimony with that of St. Paul. Especially we look for the great fundamental doctrines which we found underlying the writings of the Apostle to the Gentiles.

All these doctrines we find equally conspicuous in the works attributed to St. John. And we find them there traced to the lips of the Great Teacher. In the discourses of Christ (*e.g.* John iii. 15-18, v. 24, vi. 35, 47) faith occupies a unique place as the one condition of salvation. The strange words in John vi. 53, "*Verily, verily, I say to you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, ye have not life in yourselves,*" admit of no explanation except that our eternal life comes through Christ's death. Nor do the equally strange words of 1 John i. 7, "*The blood of Jesus His Son cleanseth us from all sin.*" These last words prove how completely the writer's mind and thought were dominated by belief that our spiritual life comes through the death of Christ. We also find the Holy Spirit specially promised by Christ on the eve of His betrayal, to dwell henceforth in His disciples. Christ occupies a place of dignity absolutely and infinitely unique, as earlier than Abraham and the foundation of the world, and as Maker of whatever exists. And the Fourth Gospel takes us into the

empty grave, and shows us the neatly folded grave-clothes of the Risen Saviour.

This remarkable agreement between men evidently so different in mental constitution and surroundings, and so intelligent, as St. Paul and the author of the Fourth Gospel, banishes all doubt that the fundamental conceptions held so firmly by each of them are correct reflections of the actual teaching of Christ. And their equal and confident assurance that He rose from the dead is a great mental fact demanding a sufficient cause.

Other witnesses are at hand from the circle of the immediate followers of Christ, ready to give evidence touching their Master and His teaching. We have the Epistles of James and of Peter, and the three Synoptic Gospels. Each of these deserves careful study on the lines marked out above. The First Gospel and the Epistle of James present, in the main, one type of teaching, a type differing widely even from the teaching common to St. Paul and to the writings attributed to St. John. This difference gives great importance to their points of contact, some of which are, though not obvious at first sight, yet broad and deep. The Second and Third Gospels and the Book of Acts present, in life size a picture of Christ and of His teaching embodying all the main features noted above in the Fourth Gospel and in the writings of St. Paul.

The method of research suggested above will place before us the chief literary evidence touching Christ and His teaching. The significance of this evidence, that is, what light it casts upon the actual facts of Christ, each student must determine for himself. Of the whole case, the only explanation conceivable to me is that the broad underlying principles common to all the longer documents of the New Testament were actually taught by Christ. For only thus can I account for the hold they took of such men, and men so different, as St. Paul and the author of the Fourth

Gospel. And, if Christ actually taught that the eternal life of all who believe the Gospel comes through His death,¹ He thereby claimed a position infinitely above the highest of men. We are, therefore, prepared to believe that the superhuman rank given to Christ by the writers of the New Testament was also claimed by Him. And their profound devotion to Christ as one infinitely greater than themselves and their fellow-men, receives its only explanation in their belief that He rose from the dead. And, if He rose from the dead, His resurrection accounts for their belief and for its effect upon themselves, and through them upon the world. For, if in Jesus Christ there was at work a power which arrested the otherwise inevitable corruption of a dead human body and brought life out of death, then are we not surprised to find in Him a power able to arrest the corruption into which in His day the entire human race was sinking, and to breathe into it a new life. If He did not rise, His disciples' belief that He did, and its direct and indirect effects, are phenomena irreconcilable with all other mental and moral phenomena, and utterly inexplicable.

It will be noticed that the above explanation of the literary facts of the New Testament and of the historical facts of Christianity, viz. that Christ actually taught the doctrines common to the chief writers of the New Testament, claimed a unique place above the entire human race, and rose from the dead, implies a sufficient cause for the distinctions of right and wrong, and for the material world: for it implies a Creator who is also a moral Ruler of His creatures. And, by revealing a retribution beyond the

¹ A volume on *The Study of Theology*, by Dr. James Drummond, gives, on pages 193-207, a somewhat full outline of the matter of Systematic Theology. But the only mention in it of the Death of Christ is a remark on page 201, "Here must be discussed the dogma of the atonement and its modifications." This omission suggests that Unitarian theology can find no place for a conception which moulded the entire thought of the two greatest immediate followers of Christ. I can account for the omission only as an extreme case of the blindness of dogmatic prejudice.

grave, it affords some explanation of the imperfection of moral retribution in the present life. For all these facts, they who reject the explanation given in the New Testament are bound to propose another open to fewer objections than that which they reject.

The above method of theological research has the advantage of being thoroughly scientific. It does not require us to take anything on trust. Its first steps rest on the solid foundation of a multitude of facts which have come under our own observation. Each subsequent step rests upon our own induction from these facts or upon further literary facts discovered as we proceed. Thus throughout our course we have under our feet solid ground.

Moreover, this method affords independent proof of each of the great doctrines of the Gospel. For it traces each of them, by the principles of historical research, to the lips of the Great Teacher. Moreover, we find that some doctrines rest upon much clearer and more abundant evidence than do some others. We are thus directed to the most important elements of the revelation brought by Christ; and are warned to examine with special care doctrines not supported by evidence so clear and abundant.

A special advantage of the mode of study here suggested is, that it does not imply that the Bible is infallible, but treats the various documents of the New Testament simply as human compositions and tests their credentials as we should those of any other writings. Now, so important an assertion as that the Bible is all true, no one should make or accept without clear proof. And the proof of this assertion is exceedingly complicated, involving a multitude of details, many of them reached only by wide scholarship. Moreover a great part of the proof lies in the words of the Bible itself. The method here adopted reveals to us, apart from the infallibility of the Bible, a firm foundation for faith in Christ; and thus leaves us to detect, at our leisure,

by the study of the New Testament which this method involves, the unique dignity and Divine authority of the Sacred Volume.

This method has also the advantage of bringing us at once into a department of study profitable to the spiritual life. It begins at the basis and source of all religion, viz. our inborn consciousness of right and wrong; and leads us at once into the presence of Christian teachers sent forth personally by Christ. To a large extent their teaching attests itself by appealing to that in us which is noblest and best and by meeting the deepest needs of our inner life. Thus the historical proof of the Gospel is confirmed by most valuable inward evidence.

The line of theological research traced in this paper enables us also to keep company with a much larger number of seekers for the truth than would any method of study assuming, or even discussing, the truthfulness of the Bible. For this assumption, or discussion, involves an immense number of details demanding careful inquiry; and therefore repels many who are not prepared for the inquiry and yet are unwilling to accept the assumption without inquiry. On the other hand, the interest attaching to the modes of thought of a teacher so famous as St. Paul will be admitted by all students of the moral and mental development of our race, even by those unable to accept as true the historical statements of the New Testament.

This method also lessens the danger of prejudice, a danger ever present in theological studies. For it raises our researches above the tumult of theological contention into the cooler atmosphere of grammar and exegesis, and propounds historical questions about the opinions of men who have long ago passed away. This is a healthy check to the partisanship evoked by the various creeds of the various Churches.

It cannot be denied that this method will give us a much

fuller and more exact knowledge of the Gospel and of Christ than can be derived from study of even the best modern works on theology. These are but skeleton outlines of the Gospel. Consecutive study of the New Testament shows us the framework of truth clothed in living flesh and blood and taking hold of matters of practical daily life. This reveals to us the practical worth of Christian doctrine. Indeed, it is not too much to say that Gospel Truth drawn directly from the Bible exerts upon us an influence altogether above that of doctrines derived from works on systematic theology. It is true that many of the practical matters referred to in the New Testament have passed away. But this will compel us to search for the broad principles underlying the teaching of the apostles. And these principles we shall find bearing upon the details of our own life as closely as upon the matters to which they were originally applied. For the great principles of human life pertain to all ages.

Although the new Testament, studied consecutively, must ever be the theologian's chief text-book, works on Biblical and on systematic theology are nevertheless of very great value. So are grammars and lexicons to the student of an ancient language, and works on botany to a student of flowers; although a knowledge of flowers derived only from books, or of a language derived only from grammars and lexicons, is poor indeed. All these helps must be kept in their own subordinate place, not as substitutes for, but as guides to, the proper object-matter of our research. Similarly, works on systematic theology are of most use to those most familiar with the Bible. For their knowledge of Biblical details will enable them to appreciate the generalisations of theologians.

Among writers on Biblical Theology, that is, writers who have endeavoured to reproduce the various conceptions of the Gospel held by the various writers of the New Testa-

ment, I may mention Neander's *Planting of the Christian Church*, a work which has been to me of greatest value. Very good also are Reuss's *History of Christian Theology in the Apostolic Age* and Schmid's *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*. To those who can resist the temptation to put these in place of consecutive study of the New Testament, and who will use them only as guides, I cordially recommend them. Unfortunately, amid the great mass of English theological literature, much of it very good, I am not able to name any work on this subject.

The line of study indicated in this paper is much more practicable than at first sight appears. Consecutive study of the New Testament is within reach of every Christian; and is specially binding on every pastor of a Christian Church. All Christians read the Bible. It is therefore easy for each one to concentrate his attention for a time on one part of it. Every half hour of prayerful study will bring him into closer contact with the writer's thought. It will not be difficult, at the close of each book, to review its chief teaching and to compare this with similar teaching elsewhere in the sacred volume. Thus almost imperceptibly we shall reproduce each writer's conception of the Gospel; and look, with them, at the One Original. In this way may, and ought, each Christian to become, in the best sense, a Christian theologian.

In another paper I hope to discuss the relation of theological research to the dogmas in which during the centuries Christian doctrine has, in the Church and the Churches of Christ, assumed definite form.

JOSEPH AGAR BEET.
