

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

*DOGMATIC THEOLOGY: ITS NATURE AND
FUNCTION.*¹

THE unambitious task we shall essay this morning is to gain a precise and comprehensive notion of the subject on which the class of Dogmatic Theology is to be engaged. In one sense, of course, this is impossible at the outset. A great philosopher has said that clear self-consciousness is the last result of action. It is not the man who is in the middle of doing a thing that knows the meaning of what he is doing, but the man who has come to the end, and looks back. The dictum is as true of sciences or of theories as of the history of a nation or a Church. At the outset, that is, you cannot condense a treatise into a phrase and call it a definition, nor would it, if you could, be of the least use to those who wish to begin at the beginning, and to form their conceptions of the science in question as they proceed. At the same time something of practical value may be done in the way of description, if not of definition strictly understood; and obviously to secure a working idea of the subject-matter of Dogmatics as well as of the methods proper for its treatment, whether it yields much positive enlightenment or not, may prove of considerable benefit in preserving us from erroneous prepossessions.

To diverge into history for the moment, it is a not unimportant detail that Systematic Theology, in its older signification, embraced what we are accustomed to regard as three distinct theological disciplines—distinct, that is, in treatment, but not really separate in fact. These were Apologetics, Dogmatics, and Ethics; the last having commonly attached to it the epithet “Christian” or “Theological,” to mark the difference that obtains between it and the more general science of Philosophical Ethics, or

¹ Inaugural Lecture to the Class of Systematic Theology, New College, Edinburgh, Oct. 20, 1904.

the Theory of Morals. Men were quite aware, of course, that these three members of the organism of Systematic are in the closest possible connexion. They all deal with Christianity as a definite truth or power at work in human life, viewed in each case, however, from a slightly different angle. You may say, for example, as Kähler does, that all three are concerned with justifying faith in Christ; Apologetics taking as its province the grounds of faith, Dogmatics its import, and Ethics its practical expression in life. Or in simpler English, you may say that they deal respectively with the presuppositions, the content, and the practical issues of saving faith. In either case, their common interest in understanding what the Christian faith is and implies signalizes the truth, not only that they are distinct, but that they are *related*, which here and everywhere else is very far the more important fact of the two. It is, then, with the second of these kindred, and, in a sense, co-ordinate studies, that we in this class are concerned.

Now in the general title of this department of theology, there occurs a very significant adjective—Systematic. That tells and foretells not a little. It means that we are at work upon a subject which is a whole—not a collection of alien fragments of knowledge, not a combination of interesting but inconsecutive ideas, but a whole. If Christianity is really one—and this is certain if Christ is one—theology, which is a sustained attempt to exhibit Christianity to a believing mind which is also a knowing mind, is a unity too. Every part of it is in vital connexion with every other part. We speak of the Caledonian Railway system, and by that phrase we mean that we can get from any one point to any other without hiatus or break. In the same way, if theology be the outcome of an effort to present the doctrine of God implied in Christianity, it will share the unity which Christianity itself has, in virtue of its source and object; and the links between its different

portions will be continuous. And thus when we theologise, or define the knowledge we have of God through Christ, in order to translate it into scientific form, all our labour rests upon the presupposition that our faith is genuinely a whole, and can be shown to be so. We take for granted that at no point shall we be put to confusion as intelligent or religious men, by coming upon a doctrine which is isolated and incoherent, wholly out of relation, "like a rock in the sky." And this assumption, as we cannot too often recollect, is itself a warning and a test. For if we find in the traditional theology this or that element which is in imperfect relation to the Evangelical conception of Jesus Christ, the centre and core of the entire doctrinal construction, there is, as we instinctively feel, something wrong somewhere. Either tradition has turned down a wrong road at this point, and failed to approach the truth in question by the avenue proper to Christian thought; or the doctrine itself is a mere excrescence, an incubus because a superfluity, and must be straightway cast out. There is room in the Christian system for nothing but saving truth.

It may perhaps be objected that the claims now made for the quality of system in Dogmatic are excessive, especially in view of the clear statement of St. Paul that "we know in part, and we prophesy in part." It is indeed true that theology must ever be only in part. We know no more than sinners deserve to know, and that is but a fragment. And besides that, a tentative and incomplete character is forced on theology by the inevitable circumstance that in dealing with religion, it is dealing with a living thing. Life, by its very idea, is the perpetual despair of thought. Experience, when we begin to reflect upon it, is already something that has been lived through; and in the very act of coming to full self-consciousness, it has parted with a certain element in its freshness and its passion. Meditation comes halting in the rear of personal history,

and while we are analysing what we thought and felt an hour ago, some further thing is possessing our heart already. "When philosophy," said Hegel, with a touch of melancholy, "when philosophy paints its grey in grey, some one shape of life has meanwhile grown old : and grey in grey, though it brings it into knowledge, cannot make it young again. The owl of Minerva does not start upon its flight until the evening twilight has begun to fall." And if theology, in this respect at least, shares the fortunes and partakes in the deficiencies of philosophy, is it not a mistake, it may be said, to claim for it the high and august character of a system? Is not this as much as to say that, as an explanation of things, or at least of Christian experience, it is adequate and final? And how is this to be combined with the certainty, of which the believing mind cannot divest itself, that in the Christian salvation there is a vast residuum of as yet unappropriated truth, an unfathomable deep of gracious meaning out of which new and unforeseen disclosures may at any moment, and do from time to time, break forth?

Considerations such as these are deeply impressive; they are so true, so peremptory, so undeniable. Yet we may surely concede their truth without prejudice, as lawyers say, to the idea of system, of proportion, of organic and reciprocal interdependence, which we take to be characteristic of the diverse elements in the theological structure. The quality of wholeness is implicitly present in religious belief, because it is present first of all in the reality which belief apprehends. No doubt there are degrees of knowledge; yet all degrees are animated and explained by the ideal of an articulate unity to be known. The forester, the botanist, the painter study the tree before them each with a different interest; nor do the conclusions of all three, when summed together, exhaust the meaning of the tree for a perfect knowledge; yet it is only as a living whole that it has any reality

for their minds. On every hand we are confronted with unities which are indivisible because they are alive, and their members, though logically separable, interpenetrate each other, and are always more or less united in existence and operation; we know them as wholes, even when we fail to discover what it is that makes them wholes. And for us, in our study of Christian truth, the same assumption is indispensable; while, as to the grounds on which it may be justified, provisionally we may say, as has been said already, that Christianity has its unity in and through Jesus Christ, the consistency of His Person, the coherent oneness of His work and influence. Christ is not divided; therefore the divisions and subdivisions of our systems are less final than they seem. The doctrines have a right to live only as they hold their life in fee from Him, and bring some real aspect of the eternal grace that is in Him to expression. Without this conviction the theologian cannot start; he does not feel it worth while to go on. And above all, for those who are to preach Christianity, it must be a point of settled conviction that the contents of our religion form a single organism of truth, capable of consistent and unified statement, and that the secret of this unity is Jesus Christ.

Already I have had occasion more than once to use the word *scientific*—as when I said that in theology the attempt is made to put our knowledge of God into scientific form. But what is meant by the term scientific when employed in this connexion? To answer this natural and indeed inevitable query, it is needful to remember that the word science may be used of the study either of *things* or of *persons*; and that its connotation is bound to vary according to the objects upon which it is directed. In physics, chemistry, botany, the mind is dealing with *things*, and dealing with them scientifically; and one not infrequently hears language which implies that this is the only sphere in which knowledge can attain really valuable

results. But to refute this rash assertion the sciences of history, ethics, sociology present themselves, with the protest that the character of science cannot be denied to these disciplines, except on the principle that among the objects of experience only those can be truly known which are *unlike* us in their inner nature, as being impersonal or inanimate ; while personality, or mind itself, is the one unknowable thing in the world. The proverb that like is known by like is a safer guide than any theory which thus threatens to make cognition stand on its head. Accordingly, when theology professes to apprehend realities of a personal, and therefore of an unseen and supersensible kind, we shall not be daunted by the objection that no genuine science can travel beyond the categories of time and space.

A full and satisfactory treatment of this subject, it is true, can be given, or at least attempted, only at a later point, when we face the problems, as numerous as they are difficult, which cluster round the nature of religious knowledge. But even here it may be said that science, in the only sense in which it is worth while to use the word, is simply the persistent effort to reach an orderly interpretation of experience, the effort of the mind to discover, in the course and movement of all outward things, intellectual principles which are identical with its own. The experience under review may be sensible, or social, or ethical, or intellectual, or religious ; but in each case what happens is that a science or a group of sciences applies itself persistently to reduce the facts to intelligibility by the formation of hypotheses or theories, and the unceasing alteration and correction of these theories, till they correspond with and account for the experiential facts from which they set out. Take away the experience, that is, and you take away the science ; for you quench the only interest which the mind can possibly feel in the scientific process—the interest, namely, of explaining facts which have actually entered into our life.

These facts, as I have hinted, may be placed in a graduated scale of value and reality, according as they concern merely some isolated intellectual faculty, or appeal to our entire personality. Mathematics, the most abstract of sciences, is an instance of the one class; ethics may be taken as illustrative of the other. And what one is moved to protest against is the tendency to restrict the term science to the most abstract and hypothetical conceptions of the mind, and to refuse it to those which are growingly concrete, growingly in contact with reality. There never has been a perfect line in real nature, a line, that is, which is all that a line should be; and our reasonings about lines, therefore, if applied to the actual world of fact, require instantly to be modified and qualified in many ways; otherwise, as we all know, they would issue in error and absurdity.¹ On the other hand, there has once been a perfect human Life, a life which was all that a life should ever be; so far from our thoughts about it being too ideal for the actuality, we know that nothing we can ever think exhausts or even adumbrates the fulness that was in Him. And if science means concrete knowledge,—knowledge, valid and certain, of things as they actually exist,—what justice is there in calling trigonometry science and refusing the name to Christian theology? I mean, is it possible to deny that the experience in the one case is infinitely more real and concrete than in the other; and that the richer species of cognition has the better claim to rank as knowledge proper?

Still, while this is true, we need not fall into the error of the intellectualist, or be confused by a plausible and therefore most malign fallacy which gave more trouble, perhaps, to a former generation than it appears to do to ours. For it used to be affirmed, especially by writers of the Hegelian school, that the task of Dogmatic is to raise faith

¹ Cf. Illingworth, *Reason and Revelation*.

to the level and the insight of knowledge. The formula has its uses, but it is at least liable to misinterpretation. If it means that Dogmatic strives to cast the utterances of naïve piety into intellectual form, that is true enough, as it is also obvious enough. For example, it is often needful to strip off the dress of figure and imagery worn by religious ideas in popular usage, before they can be fitted into their place in a theological system ; and if it only be kept in mind that the figurative character of certain religious ideas is really their salvation, and gives them their hold upon our hearts, no harm will come of the application of this principle. But in the hands of most of its champions, the principle meant something very different. It meant that the specifically religious element in belief was to be evaporated into metaphysic. Now, without losing our way in the details of criticism, we may at least say that this attempt to turn the theologian into a pure metaphysician offends against the fundamental maxim that the student of Dogmatic is no dispassionate scientist, but a servant of the Church of Christ. He is a believer ; the faith once delivered to the saints is his faith. For him, as for the Apostles, personal union to the living Christ is not merely the secret of the Christian life ; it is also the organizing principle of Christian thought and theory. And thus the propositions of a true Dogmatic still remain the utterances of personal faith as really as the appeal of the evangelist, or the prayers of the simplest believer in his cottage among the hills. Indeed it would not be too much to say that the doctrine which cannot be turned into a sermon, and preached, is not worth its place in a system of Dogmatic.

The relations of theology and philosophy, however, are not, I need hardly say, of a purely negative or exclusive sort. The practice of most theologians of repute, when embarking on their enterprises in divinity, has been to

justify the existence of systematic theology by an appeal to considerations of a more or less philosophical kind; and Ritschl, while honourably known for his services in banishing speculative rationalism from the domain of Christian doctrine, was himself no exception to the rule. Every one who begins to theologise feels how strong is the demand of intelligence for rational unity, the inconsequence of any abrupt cessation of the work of reflection, the necessity, above all, of some criterion which will distinguish the true elements of religious experience from the false. And these are philosophical ideas. In dealing with its special object, theology claims to possess no special organ of knowledge by an appeal to which inconvenient questions may be evaded. It works with the ordinary instruments of thought. No doubt valuable results can be expected only from those who sympathize with the aspirations of faith; but the same may be said, *mutatis mutandis*, of aesthetics or sociology or ethics.

Furthermore, religious experience has a cognitive side. The judgments of faith claim to be true of a reality, of a system of things, existing quite independently of our interest in it. And to conceive this world of divine and spiritual being at all, we need conceptions which are philosophical if they are anything. What other name can be given to such ideas as personality, or end, or cause? It is open to a theologian, indeed, to repudiate the meaning assigned to terms like these by the dominant philosophical school, but the modifications he may propose leave them as metaphysical as ever. Both theology and philosophy, again, are bound to discuss such questions as the possibility of miracle, or the theoretical efficacy of proofs of the existence of God. And while the argument in each case may take a different route, there is no difference of kind between the principles they apply, the criteria they seek to conform to, or the idea of truth which obtains in each department. Christian

theology has refused, and refused rightly, to submit to the tyranny of any particular system of metaphysics, or to use no terms but those that might be licensed by the philosophy of the day. Yet it has done so from no aversion to the general method of philosophy, which it accepts as its own, but from the conviction that the system in question has done violence to certain elements in faith by forcing them into logical formulas too narrow for their content.

Again, it would be ungrateful to forget that the long labour of philosophy has done a great, or rather an inestimable, service to theology by clarifying and elaborating a more or less complete set of ideas and technical terms which enable the modern divine to do his work. Putting eccentricities aside, it may be said that we build upon the assured results of logic, psychology, and ethics. And in this region, we do well to keep gratefully in mind the intellectual toil of the Middle Ages, when so much was done to survey the continent of mind, and to estimate its logical potentialities. No doubt the schoolmen had their limitations; their Platonism on the one hand, and their Scepticism on the other, made it all but impossible that they should do justice to the new and revolutionary truth of Christianity. But within these limits their work was of noble proportions, and it is a writer of real insight who has said that "in raising their theologico-philosophical structures they were fellow-workers with the architects of the great Gothic cathedrals and monastic churches of that very age. And though modern thought passed into fresh fields by rejecting considerable masses of their work, yet in certain main issues the rejections were much less extensive than is commonly supposed, and many of their leading thoughts persisted under new guises, and persist still."¹ A good deal of specious nonsense, indeed, has been talked about the dry and futile discussions of Scholasticism; although I

¹ Caldecott, *Selections from the Literature of Theism*, p. 38.

observe that this is not the language held by those who have gone most deeply into the subject.

On the other hand, however, this immense difference remains, and will ever remain, to mark theology off from philosophy, that theology is not so much concerned to discover truth, as to interpret it. For the theologian starts from a great datum. On the objective side he starts from the Gospel as realized and embodied in the historical Person of Jesus Christ, the Crucified and Risen Lord; on the subjective side, he starts from the consciousness of redemption through union to Christ. This is the situation which he is brought in to explain; and the Christian mind has no use for any theology that does not accept and deal with these facts as it finds them, or that seeks to persuade the simple believer that in giving Jesus a place, and a central place, in the Gospel, he is only the victim of decadent Greek metaphysics. Christ, and the absolute certainty of saving union to Christ, constitute our immovable point of departure; and thus it is not surprising that speculative systems, even though to some extent they employ the same principles of thought and criticism, should occasionally arrive at results so unrecognizable, so unlike the Christian verities as we find them in the writings of St. Paul and St. John. For they are really building with quite other materials than the Christian thinker, and on quite other foundations. Theology, I mean, when properly aware that its business is to deal with the specifically Christian experience, takes the unconditional truth and value of the revelation in Jesus for granted; whereas for pure philosophy this is still an open question. *Philosophia*, as the old maxim has it, *philosophia veritatem quaerit, religio sc. religio revelata veritatem possidet*. This is frequently demurred to as an overstatement, and even cited as a typical instance of how superciliously self-assertive theology can be. But obviously there is no choice; you cannot believe in Chris-

tianity at all without believing that it is the truth which is at the root of everything. Moreover, there are words of Jesus Himself on record which make any other view a treachery to the faith. We cannot forget that He said: "Neither knoweth any man the Father save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal Him," or again, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." *There* is the note of absolute and irrefragable certitude; and theology is false to its own duty and honour if it fails to preserve that note, not indeed as pertaining to its theoretical constructions, but as an inherent quality of the basis of fact on which it stands. Nor is anything more sure than the fact that you cannot meet the perplexities of men who are baffled by the enigmas of all this unintelligible world, except by holding forth to them a Gospel which is not only very great and very wonderful, but indisputably true. A conjecture may have its own charm as an intellectual toy. The pastime of forming religious hypotheses, and dissolving them again, is one of the most fascinating in which the dialectical voluptuary can engage. But moments come in every life when their essential hollowness is felt, and felt with a certain shame. In hours of fierce temptation a theory which is no more than a theory is but a broken reed, which will pierce and poison the hand that leans on it. And still more impotent do we feel hypotheses to be when we are called in to aid the man whose faith is being assailed by doubt. You must have some sure word to offer him; you cannot press a conjecture; for, in the words of Professor James, "who says hypothesis renounces the ambition to be coercive in his arguments." And another brilliant and suggestive writer has touched the same point, and named it the problem of our time. "There is abroad among thinking men of all schools," he says, "a greater consciousness of the mystery of existence. There is also an increased anxiety for some means by which to come to terms with that mystery. If Christianity is to

win and hold the allegiance of the modern mind, it must be able, if not to solve the great problems, at least to make them enduring." ¹ Endurable they can be made only by the gift of a great all-embracing assurance, and this it is the task of Christian doctrine to bestow. Let it consent to lay aside the note of certainty, and the reason for its very being is gone.

I have tried to urge that the distinction between Christian doctrine and philosophy is at bottom, at least very largely, the distinction between certainty and conjecture. But of course this dictum would have to be largely qualified. And perhaps the easiest way in which to suggest the proper qualification is to go on to say that the same distinction must be re-introduced within the sphere of theology itself. Here, too, we must clearly distinguish the central orb of light from the penumbral haze by which it is surrounded; or, as it has been put elsewhere, "we must map off the realm of certitudes from the region in which assurance is unattainable, and in which variety of speculation is admissible." What I mean may become clearer if I take an example, and the example I will take is the doctrine of the Atonement. We are told by many voices, and in particular by one voice of singular clearness and power, that in regard to this topic it is really illegitimate to distinguish the fact of the Atonement from the theory. "There is no such thing conceivable," it is said, "as a fact of which there is no theory, or even a fact of which *we* have no theory; such a thing could never enter *our* world at all; if there could be such a thing, it would be so far from having the virtue in it to redeem us from sin, that it would have no interest for us and no effect upon us at all." ² In a sense this is very true; only, if the practice of human life is any guide, it is not so true as its opposite. "In every other province of human

¹ C. F. D'Arcy, *Idealism and Theology*, p. 168.

² Denney, *Studies in Theology*, p. 106.

thought," says Dr. Dale, "we ascertain the facts first—make sure of *them*—and try to explain them afterwards. We never deny the facts because we find them inexplicable. . . . And it may be that we shall find ourselves unable to give any account of the relation between the death of Christ and the forgiveness of sin; and yet the fact that the death of Christ is the ground of forgiveness may be so certain to us as to be a great power in life."¹ It is true that the mind finds it hard to rest satisfied with the fact. It is true that it demands a doctrine, an explanation, a complete theory. But then the mind demands many things, in this life of guilt and clouded vision, that it simply cannot have. It may have adumbrations of a theory; it does have them; only we may be sure in advance that the great reality has depths in it which our line is too short to fathom. And while holding, as I do, that "Christ bore our sins in His own body on the tree," that we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, and that the doctrine which denies this is not recognizable as New Testament Christianity, I still find in the believing consciousness something which echoes to the declaration that "all that has ever been written on the subject only leaves behind the sense of the wonder of the mystery, and every explanation that has been attempted is overthrown with an ease which warns us that explanation is impossible. Every statement of the doctrine which has ever yet been made always contains those self-contradictions, those manifest breaches of the plainest rules of logic, which indicate that the human intellect is baffled." This also is an overstatement of the case; it is not possible that the meaning of the Cross should be wrapped in pure impenetrable darkness; we have the elements of a doctrine, and something more; yet it is a side of the truth which we must vindicate over and over again. The affectation of a spurious certainty regarding

¹ *Christian Doctrine*, p. 223.

what after all are no more than intellectual hypotheses, it is probable, has had too much to do with the aversion of the general mind from systematic theology. And the refusal to bind the fact of the Atonement indivisibly to all the details and all the refinements of any theory is the first step in assuring the real progress of the theory itself, as it freely strives ever more adequately to interpret the infinite fact. While at the same time it escapes the real, and sometimes the terrible, danger of leading men to believe that when their intellectual conceptions of the Atonement fall in ruins, they forfeit thereby the benefits that are ours through the Cross, or have lost the right to believe on the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world. This may be enough to indicate the need for drawing the distinction between certainty and theoretical construction, even within the precincts of theology itself.

Passing then from the relations of theology and philosophy, let us glance, ere we close, at a point of somewhat kindred interest. If Dogmatic is not a philosophical, is it then a historical science? Now we were led to note that a real difficulty emerges when it is asked how a science can deal with realities of an unseen and supersensible kind, and it is under the pressure of a similar difficulty, no doubt, that some have been moved to define Dogmatic as a purely historical discipline. Thus, for example, it has been urged, as by Schleiermacher and in a modified fashion by Rothe, that the task of Dogmatic is to give an orderly and articulate view of the doctrines prevailing in a specific Church at a specific time. But this attempt to place our science under the general heading of history has had little success; and for two reasons. In the first place, it has become increasingly clear that theology—whose object is not Church doctrine—but Divine revelation, is dealing with realities which, although they entered the stream of human life at a particular spot in the past, and consequently are historical,

yet arise above the limits of mere history, and belong to all time and all existence. Jesus Christ is indeed a figure in the annals of the world; His name is found upon the pages of ancient authors; yet it is the experience of countless multitudes to-day that He is the most urgent and substantial reality of their inward life. Mere history has no rules for dealing with such a phenomenon; and the historian who understands the limits of his province is quite aware that it is *ultra vires* for him to estimate aright a Person who is thus a historical datum, and yet claims to be of infinite significance for every soul that has ever lived. And in the second place, Dogmatic refuses to be classed among the sciences of history, because it cherishes ideals. It is interested not merely in what has been believed, but even more in what ought to be believed. It is a normative science; it sets up a standard of truth and value. It criticises the past. That criticism must be full of sympathy, or it will do no good; it must be full of humility, or it will do incalculable harm; but these conditions, difficult as they are, still may be fulfilled. It is another question from what source the norm of Christian doctrine should be drawn. In point of fact, of course, it has been drawn from a variety of sources—from Scripture, as a presumably consistent whole; from some selected portion of Scripture, which has been assigned decisive importance; or from the contents or the presuppositions of an ideal Christian experience. But whatever our conclusions on this thorny problem, at least the impossibility of ranking a normative science as historical is transparently clear.

This really implies, I need hardly say, that Dogmatic, as a science which is working towards an ideal, is bound to contain an element which is so far subjective and mutable. For naturally each theologian will put in operation a different set of criteria. He cannot think with any other mind than his own; he cannot live in any other age than

his own; he cannot change experiences with any one else not even St. Augustine; and it follows that his attitude to the traditions of the past must be a personal one. His use of Scripture, for example, will of necessity be modified by the position and progress of Biblical science in his day. Whereas a writer belonging to the third century would use Scripture, by a kind of second nature, in a predominantly allegorical sense, the historical and scientific methods of modern exegesis have made this once for all impossible. And if it be said that this appears to commit the theology of the Church to the vagaries of mere caprice, and the cry be raised for some inflexible rule by which to measure the correctness of opinions, it must be replied that no *legal* guarantee for unchanging orthodoxy can ever be given. Nothing in Christianity, let us be thankful, can be guaranteed in that way. At all events, if you call in the law, in whatever form, to protect the Gospel, you have to pay heavily for it in the end.¹ There are better sureties, too, within the reach of the Christian mind. We have the promise of the Holy Spirit, to lead the Church into all truth; we have the Word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever, and to which the Spirit bears witness perpetually in the hearts of men. These are the real,—these, when we speak strictly, are the only and the sufficient—guarantees that the mind of the believer, working freely on its data, will reach conclusions that are in line with the great faith of the past.

But in accepting this, which is after all only one of the honourable risks of Protestantism, we are putting our trust, not in the letter of symbol or confession, but in the life and power of the Holy Ghost. And as we look back, over the chequered history of doctrinal development, we seem to mark His divine guidance as it leads theologians, gradually, and doubtless with many times of retrogression, to be

¹ Cf. Denney, *Studies in Theology*, p. 195.

resolute and thorough in the effort to look at every doctrine in the pure light of the Person of Christ. "He shall take of mine, and shall show it unto you"—the promise is being fulfilled unto this day. And so far as it is fulfilled in our experience, as believers and as students of theology, it will bring us to apply the principle, unflinchingly but not, I trust, hastily, or without sympathetic care, that no doctrine can retain its place in the Christian creed save those which strike their roots deep down into the living union that binds the Christian to his Lord. It must be left, however, to the believing instinct of the individual to say when this condition is satisfied. And thus once more we turn back to the truth that the theologian must be a Christian, in frank and warm accord with the Church's common faith. The notion, widely spread though it be in Scotland, that any given man is equally fit to form a judgment on doctrine with any other, is a pure mistake, though it is one of which we find it very hard to clear our minds. There are those who have no right to an opinion respecting Christian truth; they have never sought or gained an experimental knowledge of Christ's redeeming grace; and we know that the secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him. But to the man who understands what he is doing, his theology is part of his Christian life. As he realizes afresh every day what God has done for him in Jesus, he feels that he has within his grasp the one standard of all value and all reality; and that without the decisive guidance afforded by this inward certainty, men are only playing at theology. Yes! the knowledge we have of divine truth will to the end be relative and in part; but the conviction with which we hold it may still be in essence absolute.

And it is thus, after all, that theology serves the Church—by feeding and illumining the new conviction that fills the Christian mind. It is thus, I repeat, that it serves

the Church ; for conviction is the true spring and cause of preaching ; nothing else will turn a doctrine into a Gospel. If Christianity is true, then it is designed for proclamation ; it has not begun to be what it aims at being until it is proclaimed. And for this reason the science we study here is alive and wholesome only as it springs from an indestructible certainty that in Jesus Christ we have God personally present in the world for the rescue and salvation of men, and as it moves men in consequence to go out to their fellows, making great affirmations as to the grace that is in Him for a world of sin. It is my hope and prayer that in the Dogmatic class-room still, as throughout the past, an impression of Christianity may be given which will make men eager to preach it. There we shall be occupied, not with the puzzles and enigmas of human thought, which too often reveal to us our weakness, but with the glorious Gospel of the blessed God, which is a revelation of our strength ; for strong we are indeed if God has love and we have faith. And while we shall never, I trust, forget the limitations of our insight, yet we shall take for granted from the first that God has made clear and simple what He meant by Christ, and that He meant salvation. We shall build upon the belief that it was the need and darkness of man that bespoke the compassion of the Most High, and that what He has given so freely in the Person of His Son is in the main not a problem to be wrestled with, but a gift to be received. For to treat these matters as open questions would be to affect ignorance of what every simple Christian knows perfectly well. It is a more excellent way, surely, to assume the Christian faith as the final truth for man, and diligently to search out its implications.

H. R. MACKINTOSH.