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Knowing Christ through the Scriptures

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A. DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM

I assume that by the word 'knowing' in the title what the Conference Organizers had in mind was a relationship with Christ in which the whole being of the believer was involved. This is knowledge as it is understood in the Old Testament. Porteous points out that the Hebrew word usually translated knowledge often has the meaning of intimacy with.¹ In the knowledge of God there is an intellectual content. But it occurs as part of a relationship which involves love and which is expressed both in prayer and worship and especially in action in the world. Knowing God implies living in harmony with God's will, or, as the Hebrews put it, walking with God. It is thus essentially communion with God.²

This idea of knowledge is in sharp contrast with the detached, impersonal type of knowledge that is used in natural science and in a great deal of our ordinary life in the world. Applied to God it means getting a clear conception of God without this necessarily affecting the rest of our lives very deeply. It is a knowledge 'about' rather than a knowledge 'of'. The Old Testament, on the other hand, neither attempts the clear concept, nor does it neglect the response in conduct in its understanding of the knowledge of God.

The second assumption about meaning can be quite briefly stated. I take it that it is the risen and living Lord we are to think of, the Divine Christ whom we address in our prayers.

Having made these assumptions as to the meaning of the key words in the title, our problem is: How by reading the scriptures, or hearing them expounded, do we come to know Christ? How do these historical documents bring us into a living relationship?

¹ N. W. Porteous, in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (London, 1962), p. 152.

² Th. C. Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology*,² (E.T. Oxford, 1966), p. 128.

B. THE CHRIST OF THE SCRIPTURES

Our problem is closely related to questions which were of central interest to two 19th century theologians: Kierkegaard and Kähler. What they had to say is very relevant to the present discussion at a number of points.

Kierkegaard's main concern was with the question: How am I to become a Christian? In the 'Philosophical Fragments' it takes the form of an examination of the place of the historical. He sets out the problem on the title page: 'Is an historical point of departure possible for an eternal consciousness; how can such a point of departure have any other than a merely historical interest; is it possible to base an eternal happiness upon historical knowledge?' Kierkegaard derived his statement of the problem from a question raised by Lessing. Lessing had assumed that religious truths belonged to the class of eternal truths of reason. And his question was whether such truths could be proved from the accidental truths of history. His conclusion was that they could not. For the passing from one to the other would involve a leap between two categories. But Kierkegaard, although accepting Lessing's formulation of the problem, is really examining a different question. It is not the relation between accidental truths of history and necessary truths of reason; it is the relation between judgements of history and judgements of theology.³

Kierkegaard's answer to the problem he set out is that there is one special point where the historical is the point of departure for an eternal happiness. For at this point the eternal was manifest in the historical. According to the apostolic witness recorded in the scriptures, the historic fact of Jesus Christ is a historic fact with an absolute significance. It is two-dimensional. It is both an historical fact and an eternal fact.⁴ In Jesus God was revealed in time. This is where the Divine was manifest and accordingly it is at this point that one's relationship with the Divine is to be determined.⁵

Kierkegaard plainly recognized that the fact we are concerned with is both an eternal fact and an historical fact. But when speaking about grasping the Eternal he gives little importance to the historical detail. This is illustrated in his often quoted remark: 'If the contemporary generation had left nothing behind them but these words: "We have believed that in such and such a year the God appeared among us in the humble figure of a servant, that he lived and taught in our community, and finally died, it would be more than enough."⁶

Of course this is polemic. In the preceding passage Kierkegaard has been explaining how little the contemporary generation

³ R. Campbell, 'Lessing's Problem and Kierkegaard's Answer,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 19, 1966, pp. 45 ff.

⁴ *Philosophical Fragments*, 1844 (E.T. Princeton, 1962), p. 125.

⁵ H. Diem, *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Existence*, 1950 (E.T. Edinburgh, 1959), p. 71.

⁶ *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 130.

can do for a successor when it comes to the question of faith. Here the separation in time from the original event is of small significance. Had the fact in question been a simple historical fact the case would be different. Nevertheless it is true that Kierkegaard minimizes the importance of historical detail because he is concerned with what faith sees. And faith for him is something that God gives;⁷ it is not dependent on historical detail. Clearly there is some inconsistency here. Having stressed the real historicity of Jesus it is difficult to think that historical detail can have virtually no part in the process of becoming a Christian. But, however that may be, Kierkegaard's contribution at this point is clear. His problem was how a relationship with the Eternal was possible on the basis of an historical event. Therefore from the Scriptural record the element he selected for emphasis was the Divine presence in the event.

But now, a further question arises: If our relationship with the Divine is to be one of real communion, then a definite content of information is required. That, anyway, is how it is in our knowledge of persons; there can be no knowledge 'of' in independence of knowledge 'about'. It is difficult to think that our knowledge of the living Christ can be otherwise, even if the analogy is not a very close one. It is here that Kähler's discussion of the relation between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith is important.

Kähler's main point is this: there is a single Christ displayed in the Bible. It is true that at first sight there does appear to be a disparity between the historical presentations in the synoptic gospels and the dogmatic statements in the epistles. But this is more apparent than real. For one thing the disparity was not felt until modern times. For another, even in the synoptic gospels there is a dogmatic element. It does not strike us as out of harmony with the rest of the gospels and forms a link with the epistles where this element is prominent.⁸ There are, in fact, these two elements in the New Testament but they are aspects of one picture; there are not two pictures. One element is the disciples' recollections of incidents in Jesus' life and portions of His teaching. About this element the interesting thing is that whatever may have been the history of the material in the pre-literary period, it adds up to a coherent image and gives the strongest impression of reality. This suggests that it is true to the original which stands behind.⁹ The second element is the apostolic proclamation of the significance of Christ. This proclamation gives or presupposes some knowledge of the historical facts. In the gospels there is less of this second element; in the epistles more. But both these elements are found in all parts of the New Testament. And nowhere in the New Testament is

⁷ *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 80.

⁸ M. Kähler, *The So-called Historical Jesus and The Historic, Biblical Christ*, 1896 (E.T. Philadelphia, 1964), p. 83.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

there any suggestion of a disjunction between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith.

In our initial coming to Christ it is the apostolic proclamation of the crucified and risen saviour that lays hold on us. It speaks to our need as sinners for reconciliation. And to this we turn again and again. But in our communion with the saviour it is the disciples' recollections of Jesus that we require.¹⁰ As Kähler himself puts it: 'The reason we commune with the Jesus of our gospels is because it is through them that we learn to know that same Jesus whom, with the eyes of faith and in our prayers, we meet at the right hand of God . . .'¹¹

The point being made is that the Christ of the apostolic proclamation is one with the Jesus of the gospels. Since this is of cardinal importance it should, perhaps, be dealt with a little more explicitly by setting out a number of points:

Firstly, the Christ of the epistles, the Christ of faith, is an interpretation of the historical Jesus. It does not intend to discard any features in that figure. But it discerns in Jesus another dimension than the purely human. Because it is this that especially concerns us, as Kierkegaard insisted, this is where the emphasis is placed in the epistles.

Secondly, by interpretation we do not mean simply one possible way of looking at something among others; we mean the recognition of fact. Interpretation is one way of determining facts.¹² The interpretation of faith brings to light facts which apart from this activity are not noticed—indeed cannot be seen. Faith, and theological interpretation which depends on faith, perceives something that is there.

Thirdly, what was wrong with the Life of Jesus movement which Kähler castigated was this: it assumed that the real historic Jesus could be delineated by methods taken exclusively from secular historiography. Yet if there is any transhuman element it would be automatically excluded from view; for this element could be recognized only by the insight of faith. Otherwise there is nothing to be said against the patient attempt to set out the details of Jesus' life and teaching. In the New Testament human and transhuman elements are recognized and fit together to make a coherent whole.

Communion with Christ is dependent on the whole New Testament for it is dependent on the whole Christ. The apostolic proclamation of the action and presence of God in Christ answers to our basic need of reconciliation. The disciples' recollections give knowledge about that one Jesus in whom God acted and who is the same yesterday and today and for ever.

¹⁰ M. Kähler, *The So-called Historical Jesus and The Historic, Biblical Christ*, 1896 (E.T. Philadelphia, 1964), p. 97.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 60 f.

¹² J. McIntyre, *St. Anselm and his Critics* (Edinburgh, 1954), p. 55.

C. KNOWLEDGE BY FAITH

Up to this point we have been thinking largely of the object of knowledge. Now we have to think briefly of the means of knowledge and, in particular, the means by which we may know the living Christ. This is faith. In a short paper it is not possible to discuss the analysis of faith. I am simply assuming a certain structure and using it to attempt a clear statement of how we obtain knowledge of Christ through the scriptures.

1. *Apperception*

We have already noted Kierkegaard's insistence that Eternity is particularized at a special point in time and that it is here that our relationship with the Eternal is to be determined. What we are asked to do is to take up a specific attitude towards the Jesus attested in Scripture. The first step in this direction is to recognize the divine action and presence in Jesus. But this is not something that is simply to be read off the record of Scripture as another piece of information. Recognition here means seeing it for one's self. In Kierkegaard's view it is only God who gives the condition which enables a man to see; he opens the eyes of faith.¹³ We must agree that faith is necessary for the perception of the Divine in Jesus Christ; indeed that perception is faith. But we may hold at the same time that faith has a human aspect which it is possible to describe.

The Divine action and presence in Jesus Christ is recognized by an act of interpretation.¹⁴ This is what faith is, in the aspect we are considering. We hear what the prophets looked forward to regarding a divine event which lay ahead. We read the accounts of Jesus' life and teaching in the gospels. We listen to the apostles' claims that they have become aware of God's action in Jesus Christ. By uniting such affirmations with ideas already held about the being and activity of God, we come by an act of interpretation to recognize the Divine in Jesus.

This is not the occasion to describe the part played by other factors in enabling us to see for ourselves the presence of God in Christ. Notably this would involve a discussion of the Church and of the influence of fellowship with other people who already believe in Christ. Nor do we need to discuss the place of the Divine call; neither the fact that each man who comes to faith feels that it is because God has called him in some way nor the corresponding formalized theological statements. The point being made is that the first step in faith is a penetration of the Divine incognito. And this each man has finally to do for himself. In preaching the testimony of others can be called upon, but this does not directly bring faith. In the end if a man does not, at least to some extent, see for himself he does not see at all. Yet

¹³ J. McIntyre, *St. Anselm and his Critics* (Edinburgh, 1954), p. 80.

¹⁴ J. Hick, *Faith and Knowledge* (London, 1967), pp. 217, 222.

if he is to see he has to be willing to do so. It is at this point that the God of this world is able to blind the minds of the unbelievers.¹⁵ They do not see because they do not wish to. This brings us to the second aspect of faith.

2. *Commitment*

That there is an element of will in faith has always been recognized. One reason for there being a place for the will in faith is that the claim that God was acting in Jesus cannot be proved. The necessity for decision on the basis of something less than complete demonstration is a characteristic faith shares with most of more important matters in life. As James pointed out, it is only in questions which do not directly affect our lives that we can afford to withhold judgement until we get proof.¹⁶ Faith involves a risk. There is, in Kierkegaard's terms, a decision to believe rather than to be scandalized by the paradoxical nature of the object of belief.¹⁷ In the face of something short of objective certainty the individual takes the risk in a subjective act of passionate, personal appropriation of the message.

This act of commitment is first of all a decision to believe. It is, therefore, primarily an intellectual act. But we are not detached minds; we are existing individuals. Hence considerations other than those of reality and truth are bound to enter in. On the one hand, we are pressed on to believe by the consciousness of sin and the need for forgiveness. On the other hand, we are held back by some awareness of what belief entails. For the willingness to recognize the action of God in Jesus is bound up with the willingness to make a fresh personal orientation in life. What is, therefore, basically an intellectual act of recognition of the Christ of the Scriptures involves the whole person in a new direction of life. Commitment as recognition of Christ necessarily carries with it commitment to Christ. And this means a readiness for obedience to his call for discipleship in the gospels; for the whole manifestation of the Divine in human form has to be taken seriously.

There is something more implied in such commitment. Recognition of the Biblical Christ is recognition of this Christ as crucified and risen. This is the beginning of what may be described analogically as a personal relationship. Belief 'that', in the sense of the perception of God's action in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, is passing over to belief 'in'. What is involved here appears most clearly in connection with the third aspect of faith.

¹⁵ 2 Cor. 4.

¹⁶ 'The Will to Believe', 1897. Reproduced in Ninian Smart: *Historical Selections in the Philosophy of Religion* (London, 1962), p. 392.

¹⁷ S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 1846 (E.T. Princeton, 1941), p. 540.

3. Trust

Belief 'in', as Price points out,¹⁸ may, in many instances, be reduced to belief 'that'. But there are cases where this is not so. Belief 'that' is always a part of belief 'in' but there may be more to it. Particularly this is the case with belief in a friend. Here, as well as in other examples, an element of esteeming and of trusting is involved. And trusting is not simply a cognitive attitude; it is affective as well. What applies to belief in a friend applies also to belief in God. Here again esteeming and trusting form an integral part of what is meant by faith in God.

Trust in God is a confidence that holds in spite of everything because it sees him who is invisible. This aspect of faith is discussed by Kierkegaard in 'Fear and Trembling'. He regards Abraham on his way to Mount Moriah as the epitome of faith. Abraham, according to Kierkegaard, was fully prepared to sacrifice Isaac, but yet believed that somehow God would not require the sacrifice. It was not a hoping against hope but a trust in God beyond the reach of reason or human calculation.¹⁹ And so Abraham became God's intimate acquaintance.²⁰ This is a figurative way of saying that he entered into a deep personal relationship with God. We may agree with Kierkegaard's opinion. For trust is a central element in personal relationships; indeed, if we may follow Farmer, it most fully expresses such relationship.²¹ And just as Abraham had such a faith in God, so may we have a like faith in the risen Christ.

D. CONCLUSION

The relationship with Christ that we have been describing in the latter part of this paper constitutes knowledge in the sense in which it was defined at the beginning. The intellectual content comes from reading the gospel accounts together with the apperception of the Divine presence in Jesus, brought out especially in the epistles. But for the recognition of Christ an act of commitment is also required and this carries the whole person in a new direction of life. It involves a readiness for action in the world in accordance with his commandments. This means a life lived in harmony with his will. Along with trust in his purposes, it is part of a communion with Christ that includes also the response of love and of prayer and worship. This is what the knowledge of Christ is.

Our discussion has largely been in terms of coming to know Christ in conversion. The same thing may come about gradually

¹⁸ H. H. Price, 'Belief "In" and Belief "That"', *Religious Studies*, I, 1965, pp. 24 ff.

¹⁹ S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 1843 (E.T. Princeton, 1941), p. 47.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

²¹ H. H. Farmer, *The World and God* (London, 1936), p. 21.

and unselfconsciously. But conversion, just because it does involve deliberate decision, forms something of a paradigm of the way Christ is known. It is not suggested that such a first knowing is more than a beginning; there is a deepening in the knowledge of Christ. But it is a continuing in the way begun. And because the living Christ is one with the Christ of the Scriptures, there is sense in regarding Bible reading and prayer as the standard means of grace for the individual's use in such deepening of knowledge. It is, as the hymn writer suggests, beyond the sacred page that we seek the Lord. But, as she also implies, it is through the sacred page. For it is on the sacred page that the Reality beyond it is depicted.

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