

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 Expository Times* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

THE EXPOSITORY TIMES.

Notes of Recent Exposition.

A NEW book by Dr. Burnett Hillman STREETER is sure of a good welcome. In his recent volume, *The God Who Speaks* (Macmillan; 5s. net), we have the Warburton Lectures, 1933-35. The aim of the Lectures is to show reason for the belief that the voice within, such as the prophets of the Old Testament heard, is an authentic communication from the Divine—dimmed, no doubt, and at times distorted by mental and moral limitations.

'The greatest need of mankind to-day—socially and individually—is a true sense of direction. Our world is like an Atlantic liner deprived of rudder, compass, sextant, charts, and wireless tackle, yet compelled to go full steam ahead. There is magnificence, comfort, pulsating power; but whither are we going? Does that depend solely on the accident of circumstance and the ever-changing balance of conflicting interests and ambitions? Or is there available for man, if he so will, guidance on his dark and dangerous course from some Wisdom higher than his own?'

It is the author's conviction that man is offered guidance from the Spirit of God. There are normal modes by which the Divine plan is made known to us. But if we are to receive an authentic message from the Divine, certain conditions must be fulfilled. These are mainly four: (1) Absolute devotion or surrender of the self to the Divine; (2) conviction of unworthiness and sin; (3) a life

of fellowship with others; (4) some measure of suffering, sacrifice, or humiliation.

These conditions may be illustrated from the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments: (1) from Isaiah's 'Here am I, send me,' and from Christ's 'Follow me'; (2) from Isaiah's 'I am a man of unclean lips,' and from the initial confession of sins demanded of would-be entrants by the primitive Church; (3) from the Pauline exhortation to teach and admonish one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs; and (4) from the Pauline description of the Christian as having been buried with Christ unto death, and from Christ's exhortation to His disciples to bear their own cross and come after Him.

On the first condition above mentioned, that of complete surrender to the will of God, the author remarks that it is a fallacy of the imagination to suppose such a condition detrimental to the essential freedom and spontaneity of personality. God is not another human being, but the all-pervading Reality, in whom we live, and move, and have our being. And it is the testimony of great souls that His service is perfect freedom.

'The members of an orchestra renounce nothing of their liberty when they take the lead from the conductor. Indeed, the greater the conductor the higher is the degree of spontaneity evoked by him; and the more completely each performer

surrenders himself to the conductor's lead, the more completely does he realize, and know that he is realizing, his own individual potentialities and powers. Hence the ovation sometimes given by an orchestra to its leader at the end of a great piece greatly rendered.'

It is by passages such as the two already quoted that Dr. STREETER makes his points live in his pages. It should be added that his well-known sympathy with the religious fellowship called the Oxford Group is largely due to the fact that the adherents of that Movement make belief in Divine guidance a conspicuous element in their personal religion.

It may be objected that, once we allow that ordinary men and women can receive direction from a supra-human Source, we are defenceless against haphazard suggestions from the depths of the sub-conscious, and against the boundless capacity for self-deception inherent in the human heart. But there must be, as the Bible itself witnesses, some testing and sifting process before the individual's conviction of guidance can be accepted as the authentic voice of God.

The problem of evil, physical and moral, is of perennial interest. Since man became a thinking being, able to reflect on his own experience and what he saw of his neighbour's experience, it has pressed itself on his attention. All human philosophies and nearly all religions are so far attempts to lighten the mystery. And the mystery remains.

No minister, unless he be very young and inexperienced, will lightly undertake to solve the problem. If he chooses to preach on it just because he knows it is of general interest, and nothing else suggests itself as a topic for the necessary sermon on the coming Sunday, he will, like as not, do more harm than good, clear away one surface difficulty at the cost of suggesting much more thorny questions, and convince nobody. He may well hurt rather than help.

But in his pastoral work he will often be compelled to face it. What is he to say to the bereaved mother whose faith has been shaken? Or to the small-holder whose fruit crop has been blighted by a late frost?

Well, there are some things he ought not to say, and some gleams of comfort he ought to be able to give. And we have uncommon confidence in commending to his perusal and study a really excellent little work which has just appeared, by the Rev. J. S. WHALE, President of Cheshunt College, Cambridge, entitled *The Christian Answer to the Problem of Evil* (S.C.M.; 2s. 6d. net)—a small volume of less than a hundred pages but extraordinarily good.

The author gave a series of broadcast talks last spring on the subject. His friends have done us all a good turn in persuading him to publish them. They are printed as given, but a very interesting chapter is added which deals with the main types of criticism which a voluminous subsequent correspondence conveyed.

First we have a necessarily brief but penetrating critique of some attempted solutions of the problem of evil. In that problem there are three fixed points, and in Christianity the three stand out with 'uncompromising clearness': (1) God's absolute sovereignty, (2) God's character as holy love, (3) the indubitable reality of evil. Some solutions simplify the issue by getting rid of this triangle. There is the answer of fatalism which practically makes God the author of evil, a view which St. Paul, St. Augustine, and Calvin barely avoided. That cannot satisfy because 'if sin were necessitated by God, it could not be sin.'

A second false solution argues that in reality there can be nothing wrong with the universe. If that be so, then evil is just a delusion of the mind. But we do not get rid of given facts by regarding them as unreal. Such things as lust and cancer and insanity cannot be so easily abolished. And if one of the fundamental elements of human experience is an illusion, that in itself is

surely an evil. Others explain evil as necessary to the good of the whole. But 'the optimism which belittles evil is an immoral optimism.' And on this view God 'does evil that good may come.' Yet again, if evil be necessary to the good of the whole, why should we strive to remove evil?

Another line of solution is dualism. Over against God stands the devil. The author argues in his last chapter that the hypothesis of organized evil is not to be lightly dismissed. But he shows cogently that we must not hold by such a dualism as would virtually deny God's sovereignty. Besides, to attribute all our ills simply to Satan is only to push the problem farther back; our problem then becomes, 'Whence came Satan? And why is he evil?'

Atheism seems to have a simpler solution; for the acuteness of our problem really depends on our faith that the world is under a God of omnipotent holy love. If there be no such God, the problem of evil disappears. But curiously another is started, namely, the problem of good. 'How are we to account for man's sense of good and his reverence for it?' 'Whence comes the moral sense?'

In approaching the positive side our author makes one or two very important points. He discusses the connexion between moral and physical evil, showing how an absolute distinction is impossible, but arguing strongly against the 'fallacy' — contradicted by experience — that individual physical well-being and moral worth should correspond. Yet he emphasizes a very weighty consideration — 'human selfishness and sin,' (might he not have added ignorance?) '*collectively considered*, will explain much if not most of human woe.' 'It is the fearful fact of sin which is the one completely irrational fact in the universe.'

Then we must remember that our world and the

conditions of our life are not static but evolutionary. The universe, in the Christian view, as moral, aims at the highest good; and this is not simply to be equated with happiness. And all through the development life has grown fuller and richer by conflict. Further, if progress is to be sure, order and impartiality are indispensable. One 'natural' law for the righteous, another for the unrighteous would mean chaos.

So, too, man's worth lies in his moral personality and without the responsibility of choice, that is, without the *possibility* of wrong-doing, morality would be meaningless. Man would be not a man but a machine.

Lastly, what specific light does Christianity cast on the dark mystery of sin, sorrow, or pain? Christianity no more than any science or philosophy has any trim formula for the intellectual solution of the problem. Intellectually it is insoluble. To many of our bewildered 'whys?' Christianity has no answer. Only it may confirm our suspicion that not a few of our 'whys?' are futile. Christianity does not solve the problem of evil, but it does transform it. There are many things we cannot think out, but we may live them out. We find light when we stop asking, 'Why should it be so?' and ask, 'What am I to do about it?' To believe that evil may be turned to final good and to realize his task in that transformation is the Christian's part.

And, not only for his encouragement but for his very life, let him never forget Christ's death and resurrection. There on Calvary the seemingly supreme triumph of error and sin; but on Easter the seeming victim rising conqueror. That is the very heart of the Christian message to a sorrow-laden, sin-stricken world. Evil can be conquered, is destined to be conquered. And in the triumph of the Lord's resurrection is the pledge and power of our victory.

