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# THE EXPOSITORY TIMES.

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## Notes of Recent Exposition.

WE earnestly hope that the course of events in the Far East will permit the holding of the projected meeting of the International Missionary Council next year in Hangchow. If, as we trust, it does meet, it will be a singularly interesting, impressive, and challenging assemblage; for the delegates sent from Asia and Africa will slightly outnumber those from Europe and America. It reminds us forcibly that the world is one as never before, and that Christianity is a world-religion as never before.

The questions which are being studied with a view to the meeting are big questions about the Faith and the Church in action. Principal J. S. WHALE was asked to write something which might be informative and stimulative of interest in next year's proceedings. The learned Principal disclaims very modestly any special equipment which would enable him to speak on the Church in Asia; but he is rightly persuaded that, however different externals may be in Asia, in India, or China, the Church in every land is faced with fundamentally the same task.

So he has set down some very important considerations in a little book which is entitled *What is a Living Church?* (Edinburgh House Press; 1s. net). That, it seems to us, was the big question to which all the discussions at Edinburgh this autumn pointed. And that is the question of which all the proposed agenda for Hangchow present different aspects.

What, then, is a living Church? According to Principal WHALE it is revealed to the world and stands forth by its faith, its worship, its witness, and its action.

'Living Christianity is what it has ever been, a believing Christianity.' 'The New Testament is never wistful; it rings with a note of solemn joyous certainty.' 'Conviction is the presupposition and *raison d'être* of the Gospel.' And first and last Christian belief is belief in the living God who has revealed Himself to man. Then there is belief about sin. Then belief in Jesus Christ our Lord, this last being 'the vital heart of our faith.' Then there is belief in the Church catholic and evangelical as 'the sacred gift of God—a wonderful and sacred mystery, the great company of the elect of God stretching beyond the sight of any man across the centuries and the continents.'

In face of the doubts expressed as to this faith it is argued that the Christian faith is rational, realist, and redemptive. No Barthian need shudder at 'rational' as Dr. WHALE uses the term. He means merely that the Christian faith answers in a way which nowise offends reason—the questions which a serious reasonable man is compelled to raise. By 'realism' he means that the Christian religion deals with man as he really is, not sentimentalized; it deals honestly and fairly with sin and man's inability to help himself. It opposes the optimistic humanism which came to its climax in the Great War. Against the ideology of Fascism or Communism, Christianity, like every living religion, holds up redemption, and believes it knows the secret in 'the Word of God coming from eternity into time and in terms of time, in judgment and sovereign grace.'

Let us pass to the searching sections on witnessing. 'Vital Christianity,' says Dr. WHALE, 'is necessarily

a witnessing Christianity.' 'Real religion is always enthusiastic and propagandist.' 'Our faith is not safe, nor is it real faith, unless we find it so precious that we cannot keep it to ourselves, and unless we realize that religious individualism is a contradiction in terms.' 'The religion which a man cherished in his bosom and kept to himself would not be religion but religiosity, and even religious fellowship which he enjoyed with a coterie of like-minded friends—carefully selected people of his own class or culture—would not be religious fellowship but mere gregariousness. He only begins to understand the Gospel when he understands that it is God's Good News for all sorts and conditions of men, and cries, Woe is me if I do not preach it. Unless we are ambassadors for the faith we are not holding the faith.'

We have to witness to ourselves, to children, and to the great multitude everywhere which is largely pagan. The call to witness begins at home. If our witness to the world is to be effectual and convincing we must look first and last and all the time to ourselves. A renewal of vital religion in the world must begin among professed Christians. What is the way of renewal?—Prayer. Multitudes in our time have ceased to pray, and when praying ends, paganism and practical materialism begin. The deadliest enemy of religion is not doctrinaire atheism in Russia, but the practical atheism nearer home which 'neither denies nor affirms, but just ignores.'

The religious inner life of the Church depends on the religious life of the home, and *vice versâ*. 'If there is no regular and real prayer in private and in the family, if our homes are not places where prayer is wont to be made; if there is no private and diligent study of the Bible whereby men search the Scriptures and find in them the fount of divine wisdom—little wonder that many a church service seems weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable, and that no effective progress is made in the ordinary Christian group to grow in the knowledge of the living God. Public worship thus degenerates into the likeness of a public meeting (without its possible liveliness) and the result is dreariness and spiritual death.'

It is interesting to find Dr. WHALE strongly disposed to recommend the formations of *ecclesiolas in ecclesiis*—the experiment of small or large groups within the congregation that would meet for prayer and the study of the Word. 'Their life together in the intimacy of prayer and consecration would be a vicarious priesthood, convincing others, subduing them to the same contrition, and drawing them into the same fellowship of renewal.'

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Dean Albert C. KNUDSON, of Boston University School of Theology, is not so well known on this side of the Atlantic as he ought to be. His books are a credit to the theological scholarship of American Methodism, and are to be commended for the clearness of their expositions and the soundness of their judgments. They furnish notable contributions not only in the field of Old Testament Theology, but also in that of Systematic Doctrine. Nor has the philosophical basis of theology been neglected by him. He has now followed up his defence of personalistic theism with an able plea for *The Validity of Religious Experience* (Abingdon Press; \$2.00).

It is a timely work, and has been written in full view of recent discussions in America and Britain. The only criticism of it we would offer is that it does not appear to move so freely and independently among contemporary writings in this field as one might have expected. Dr. KNUDSON is so experienced a writer and has established so secure a place for himself in the theological world that he might safely have paid less homage to other writers than himself.

A discussion of the nature of religious experience leads to the main part of the work, in which are examined the various grounds for believing in the truth or validity of religious experience. To this question there are three chief answers. One emphasizes the immediacy of religious experience, another its value, and another its principle of self-verification. These three answers are subjected to a careful examination, and the conclusion is stated

that the ultimate basis for belief in religious experience as valid is to be found, not in its immediacy, nor in its practical utility, but in the native religious endowment of the human spirit. It is argued that religion is structural in the human mind, and as such has logically as valid a basis as has philosophy, or morality, or art. Like those other phases of experience it verifies itself, and no profounder validation is possible.

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For the exposition of these views reference must be made to the pages of the work itself. We would now draw attention to the last of its five chapters, which deals with the specific Christian experience, as distinguished from religious experience in general. Here the same appeal is made to man's religious nature. Like other religions Christianity is validated by the common religious reason. The Christian type of experience professes to be no more than the purest and most highly developed form of religious experience. 'Christ would mean nothing to us unless there were already within us a native yearning after the divine.'

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We shall not pause to indicate in detail how obnoxious such doctrine is to the Barthian theology. We go on to say that Dr. KNUDSON prefaces his treatment of the most significant elements of Christian experience with a reference to its uniqueness. A deep consciousness of sin, a profound belief in the divine grace, and a strong spirit of hope appear in other religions of the 'prophetic' type (as distinct from the 'mystical'), but in Christianity they have received a unique development, and they are basic to the framework of the Christian life.

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But the most distinctive element in the unique Christian experience is the experient's sense of personal relationship to Christ. The mystical consciousness of being united to Christ in a direct personal relation is involved even in the sense of the Divine Presence. God comes to the Christian as the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ and Deity are for the Christian indissolubly linked together. God is for the Christian a Christ-like God. And the profoundest Christian thought

of Christ is that God was in Him reconciling the world unto Himself.

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That God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself is indeed a presupposition of Christian experience. If less than this were affirmed with reference to Christ, Christian experience would lose its distinctive character. But how to conceive of the presence of God in Christ is one of the most perplexing questions that have engaged the attention of Christian thinkers. It should be observed, however, that Christian experience is not concerned with the mode of the Divine immanence or the method of the reconciliation. All that Christian experience is concerned with is the fact of Christ, the fact of His unique relation to God, the fact of His reconciling activity.

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'If God was actually in Him reconciling the world unto Himself, we need nothing more. That is sufficient ground for assigning to Him the position of Divine leadership which He has occupied in Christian experience from the beginning.'

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Dr. Lynn Harold HOUGH includes in his book of essays—*The Civilized Mind*—one on 'The Message of Colossians,' which is a quite brilliant piece of exposition. He compares Paul, immured in his prison in Rome, with Sir Walter Raleigh, who, during his twelve years of confinement in the Tower of London, wrote his famous 'History of the World.' Both were daring men of action, hungering for commanding achievement in the world. Both had a large capacity for brooding thought, and to both prison brought an opportunity for the high adventures of the mind which would scarcely have been found in any other way.

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Paul's experience of travel and contact with men in the Roman Empire had affected his mind profoundly. He was constantly receiving benefits from the Pax Romana. And more and more this vast organization of the life of civilized man impressed him as something beneficent. Roman engineering, Roman law, and the Roman spirit evidenced the strength, vigour, and vast serviceable-

ness of the imperial régime. And so his thought tended to become more and more imperial. If a human institution could be made so potent a force for good, what might not the Christian religion achieve for bringing unity and coherence to the life of man.

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And it was the busy life of men, their keen and turbulent thoughts, their moral battles and spiritual possibilities which most stirred Paul. Unlike Wordsworth, he was not aroused to spiritual understanding by the lonely silences of Nature. He was more interested in people than in things. No impulse from the vernal wood had anything to say to him about moral evil or good. And therefore it was in a city like Rome that he felt himself most profoundly moved. His thoughts were stirred to vividness and imaginative splendour when he felt the throb of life in the world's metropolis around him. The enforced quiet of his prison life only emancipated his mind and gave his imagination wings.

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At the time at which Paul arrived in Rome things were altering for the worse. Nero's five benignant years of rule were giving way to the period of wild and cruel ferocity. Paul had confidently expected justice in the court of the Emperor, but that dream was rudely dispelled, and he was forced back on the sources of comfort and courage in his own faith. At the same time he received word from Epaphras of the quaint heresies that were invading the Colossian Church, heresies which, above all, were a lowering of the dignity and saving power of Christ, and the substitution of various intermediaries.

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It was under this double stimulus that there came to him that wonderful conception of the 'Cosmic Christ.' In Him all things were created. In Him 'we must seek for the ultimate meaning of the world.' He is all and in all, everything and in everything. This is the highest flight of Paul's imperial vision. It is clear that he could never regard the religions of the world as on one level, each with some contribution to make to the final religion which is a synthesis of them all. He was certain that the Christian religion was not an aspect of

man's quest for God, but was God's quest for men, God in action in Jesus Christ for the remaking of human life. This was the deep source of Paul's life.

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His message in Colossians is that Christ is the very secret of the life of the universe. And the Church of twenty centuries is especially with Paul at this point. If the Christian Church should ever forget that in Christ God comes into human life as He comes in no other person, in no other place, in no other way, the day of creative power for the Christian religion would come to an end. So Paul believed, and this is the heart of what he was saying to the Colossians.

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It is essentially characteristic of this Epistle that all its practical suggestions about personal and family and social virtue are deeply related to Paul's vision of the finality of Christ. His spirit is to control all the activities of men, as it masters the world of creation and the vast and impalpable regions beyond. The vision of His universal significance is to change men's attitude towards all processes of thought and all human relationships. The vision of the cosmic significance of Christ which transfigured a prisoner's life for Paul was to transform the thought and life of Christian men everywhere.

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This, then, is the message of the Epistle to the Colossians. Only a transcendent Christ can meet the need of this strange creature, man. There are, as we have seen, strands in this cord of faith. It is better to say there were currents of influence leading Paul inevitably towards this faith. His sensitiveness to the imperial idea, the sufferings that threw him back on himself and made him ask what it was on which he leant, and the challenge offered by the weird heresies at Colosse. And the issue in his soul was this dominant claim for his Saviour. It is a tremendous claim, but it is the faith by which the Christian Church lives. Whenever the Church is fully conscious of its high calling it rises to the Alpine heights where everything else becomes insignificant in the light of the cosmic significance of Christ.