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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 Value of the New Testament for the Christian Church.

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IN a previous article I endeavoured to state the value of the Old Testament in view of current depreciation, and even opposition to its use. At first consideration there does not seem any similar reason for dealing with the New Testament. On closer scrutiny, however, more reasons than one can be given for asking the question: Are there not movements and tendencies within and outside of the Church which should lead us to a closer study and thus a higher appreciation of what the New Testament not only does, but can mean in informing, correcting, and confirming the Christian faith? The scholarship of to-day devotes itself so largely to what one may call the *microscopic* study that it often neglects the *telescopic*; it hangs on so much to the parts that it is in danger of losing hold of the whole; the defect of the expert often is that in learning more and more about less and less, he is learning less and less about more and more. I do not depreciate this meticulous accuracy, and so far as I am able, I keep myself informed as to the methods and results of this specialized study. My own interest and activity have been of a wider range—religion as one of the normal functions of human personality; Christianity as the sole religion which can claim to be universal extensively and intensively as meeting the religious need of the whole manhood of mankind; the Old Testament as the record of the preparatory progressive, and the New Testament of the final consummatory revelation of God to mankind; Jesus the Christ or Lord as the focus of divine truth and grace in human history, the 'same yesterday, to-day, yea, and for ever.'

It is not the record of the Synoptic Gospels alone which must be set against the challenge of the historical reality of Jesus, which, however, is less prevalent than it was a generation ago. The records of the Early Church, especially the Pauline letters, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Romans, are unintelligible unless a personality, that cannot be measured by ordinary historical standards, was the real object of the common faith of the Christian community. The tendency to concentrate on the Synoptic Figure, and to suppose that the whole edifice of the Christian Church will totter to its fall if the foundation of the Synoptic

Gospels is weakened, is encouraged by a section within the Christian Church itself, who might without injustice be described as adherents of the *Jesus* religion, for the living Christ of the Apostolic Faith, if not explicitly, is implicitly denied; and it is the teacher, example, and companion of the earthly ministry, who is accepted as leader in the things of God and goodness, although He is not confessed Lord as the Christian Church means that title in its creed. Such discipleship must not be despised, for that is how the Christian community began; but there it did not end, nor can this creed be accepted as adequate to explain the Christian Church in its ministry as the body of Christ, the habitation of His Spirit to the world. In Christian morals this restriction has its dangers; Jesus was not a legislator as was Moses; the Sermon on the Mount is not the Christian code, as was the Law associated with Mount Sinai. The Synoptists do present us with a historical personality who does seem great enough in the impression He made, the influence He wielded, the confidence and devotion He inspired, to remain the object of the faith of His disciples, despite the tragic disappointment of their hopes in His Cross, great enough to make possible the expanded faith in His Resurrection as the Risen Lord, great enough to be the source of the creative epoch begun at Pentecost.

It is to be remembered that the Synoptic Gospels are not impartial contributions to biography, but were written because of that faith, and in order to preserve, diffuse, and confirm that faith. We must take the historical reality as a whole, as the New Testament presents it. I have tried to follow as closely as I could the course of the literary and historical criticism of the Gospels, the two source hypothesis (Mark and Q) the four sources (Mark, Q, M, L), and now *Formgeschichte*; but for my present purpose I do not need to enter into the minutiae, but must content myself with two remarks. First, I marvel at the confidence with which some scholars distinguish what Jesus could have said and could not have said. There is the objective test of the conditions under which, and the persons to whom He was speaking. There are sayings irrelevant to the immediate situation, and anticipatory of later developments. But, if we take due

account of His greatness for the reasons given above, we shall be less ready to measure Him by the contemporary standards of moral or religious discernment, we shall beware of assuming as artificial ornaments of hero-worship words and deeds which make more intelligible the faith of which He was the object. Secondly, we shall stress the first word *form* in the compound *Formgeschichte*. We need not deny that the tradition about Him may have been affected in transmission by the contemporary literary forms, although I am not always convinced by the ingenuity of the exponents of this method. But granting the legitimacy of the method, which is by no means accepted without reserves by equally competent scholars, using Samson's riddle :

From the eater came something to eat,
From the strong came something sweet
(Jg 14¹⁴, Moffatt),

we can get out of this criticism a confirmation of the faith in Jesus, and using its heifer for *our* plough (v.¹⁸) we may call attention to the fact that it was a widely diffused common *faith* (Streeter's hypothesis suggests four different local sources), which used these forms. If we compare the historical personality which emerges from these traditions with the heroes of the tales cited as parallels in the *forms*, we shall not regard Him as only one of them ; and still more, if we do not sever, as we have no right to sever, the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith.

On the other hand, we must with equal decisiveness oppose the tendency to let the Jesus of history fall into the background, and to form a theology about the Christ of faith inconsistent with the facts of the Jesus of history. A great many years ago a marked New Testament was issued, in which the texts setting forth the plan of salvation were underlined. Great was my surprise to find how little of the gospel was discovered in the Gospels. There is a narrow evangelicalism, which depends on Pauline texts often taken out of their context, and dogmatically and not historically interpreted, which often much needs the moral correction of the Synoptic Gospels. Again, the ecclesiastical dogma of the person of Christ, while affirming the humanity of Jesus, goes metaphysically far beyond the metaphysics which appear in the Johannine and the Pauline interpretation. In our Christology we need to go back to the *whole* New Testament—Gospels and Epistles—to get the historical reality of Jesus Christ our Lord in its unity and consistency.

I have just spent four days in reading a manuscript of a history of Christian doctrine and practice up to the Reformation. The impression made upon me was that God's Spirit did not abandon the Church, but divine truth and grace were preserved ; and we must not assume, as an extreme Protestantism seems to do, that the Holy Spirit withdrew between the first and the fifteenth century with only a rare occasional activity in the Church ; nor yet that all the developments, theological and ecclesiastical, were aberrations and corruptions, and had no necessity and justification in changing historical conditions. Nevertheless the conclusion was also fixed upon me, that, making full allowance for local and temporary modes of presentation, it is the New Testament which needs to be applied to the history of the Church as the permanent and universal standard to determine what is, and is not Christian in our religion and morals. As the volume, entitled *Convictions*, which summarizes the replies of the churches represented to the Reports of the Lausanne Conference (1927), clearly shows there is little (or no) inclination for such a return to the historical sources, and an assumption that current doctrines and practices are to continue the final authority. There can be little hope for the United Church unless the churches go beyond their historical divisions to the one body presented in the New Testament. In the German churches there seems to be an increase of what has always repelled me in many German theological works, much as I owe to them, a servile subjection to Luther. Great as Luther was, he was not great enough to give us the complete Christ. On the Continent there is a return to Calvin, which has also its advocates among us. Great as Calvin was, I do not find in him much that Jesus gives me. To go to the New Testament for proof-texts for Lutheranism or Calvinism is to get far less of its value than an impartial, scholarly, historical study can give us. We must not imitate the arrogance of some sects who claim to be nothing else than 'Christians' or 'Disciples,' and have often proved more sectarian than any of the great historical churches.

A return does not mean a literal imitation in creed, code, polity, or ritual. There has been progress, there must be progress, for one age could not, and did not in experience or interpretation exhaust the riches of truth and grace in the revelation of God and redemption of man in Christ. We have not exhausted our understanding of the New Testament. Let us recall how much the rediscovery of the idea of the Kingdom of God meant two generations ago for the thought and the life of the Church,

and how much we have advanced in the interval in our understanding of that idea. I believe that we may have a similar gain in trying to understand the idea of the Son of Man; we must let the scholars tell us what the term meant in *Daniel* or in *Enoch*, but we must exercise our discernment to discover the mind of Jesus concerning it. I have been led to a conclusion which seems of value to theology and ethics.

If Christ rose from the dead, and if the Spirit was given to the Church, then we must treat the experience which is interpreted by the Pauline and the Johannine literature as the continuation of the earthly ministry of Jesus in a wider range and a greater effectiveness of divine truth and grace for the saving of men. In the teaching of Jesus scholarship enables us to reconstruct the historical situation and to separate the temporal and local husk of contemporary thought and life from the permanent and universal verities and realities of the eternal God as mediated to human experience in the living Christ through the Holy Spirit. There are in Paul things hard to be understood; he has suffered much from some of his interpreters; he shows Jewish limitations from which Jesus is free; as in his lifetime so till now he excites prejudices and hostility. But 'the earthen vessel' cannot hide from spiritual discernment the personal greatness of the man, and the marvel of the new creation wrought in him through the grace of Christ. Surely in His captive, Christ celebrates His triumph (2 Co 2¹⁴). While in my book on *The Beloved Disciple* I tried to distinguish the reminiscences of the witness from the reflexions which grew out of these reminiscences, yet we need not regard the second as of less value than the first. It was in an intimate communion with the Risen Lord that by His Spirit the disciple was led into the fuller meaning of the words which he had heard. Were spiritual geniuses, heroes of faith, martyrs for truth, such as were these two believers, the victims of hallucinations? Was their Christ an illusion? Was their illumination by the Spirit of God only their own mental activity? A conclusion this is which seems to me absurd if God be in history at all. A return backward to the Apostolic Church and Christ as its centre means also an ascent upward, nearer to the mind, heart and will of God, and such an ascent makes us surer of God.

I must close with the affirmation that what meets us, subdues us, commands us in the New Testament is not merely a historical, but a suprahistorical reality, not the temporal phenomena only but the eternal noumenon (to borrow Kant's distinction).

The eternal reality of the love of God, mediated historically in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is experienced individually and corporately in the common possession of the Holy Spirit, in, and yet above and beyond history; 'the white radiance of eternity' is here seen streaming through the many coloured dome of time (using Shelley's metaphor). Just as philosophy cannot logically demonstrate the existence of God, although it can show that faith is not unreasonable, so historical study cannot demonstrate that the Jesus of history is the Christ of faith, although it can show a continuity of events, and still less that in the Christ of faith God Himself is present and active, redeeming the world from sin and reconciling the world unto Himself. A comparison of Jesus as historically apprehended with other religious teachers to prove His supremacy has a legitimate place in Christian apologetics. For Christian dogmatics the Incarnate Word, the Christ of faith, is no doctrine about God, (our comprehension of the revelation is often too intellectualist); it is the Living Mighty Word of God in action and passion saving to the uttermost all who come to God through Him.

Of all the men whom I have met, none more impressed me with his massive greatness than did Dr. Dale of Birmingham; and for him Christianity was not the leadership of the historical Jesus only, but the fellowship of the living Christ as Saviour and Lord; and that it must be if the Church is to recover her vitality and vigour. We may have our doubts whether, if the historical evidence were lost, the present witness of believers would suffice to preserve the faith as he believed, for after all the redemptive revelation was given in the history, of which the New Testament is the record, and a return to the record is a necessity for the confirmation of the faith. On the other hand, however, that the faith not merely survives, but lives with a life that is not of man but of God, may strengthen us against doubts which a historical study that lacks spiritual discernment may leave. What Dr. Dale affirmed the Reformers described as *the inward witness of the Holy Spirit*. We cannot be too grateful to our scholars, nor use their labours too diligently in our study of the New Testament; but we need the seers and the saints (there are scholars who are that also); and their witness of what Christ has proved to them and made of them, if confirmed in our own experience, can alone disclose to us the value of the New Testament as a historical record bringing God to us in grace that we might be brought to God in faith in Jesus the Christ our Lord.