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THE PRESENT POSITION OF EVANGELICALS IN RELATION TO THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE

THE subject before us this afternoon as your programme indicates is "The Present Position of Evangelicals", and to me has been allotted the task of dealing with that aspect of the subject which concerns the relationship of Evangelicals to Theology and Science. It is with some diffidence that I approach the subject, for I am neither Theologian, nor, in one sense, Scientist, for my profession is an applied rather than a pure Science. The Theologian speaks in a language with which I am unfamiliar, and the pure Scientist is oft-times concerned with abstractions for which I have little time. However, possibly my very disabilities in this respect may turn out to my advantage in that they permit me to approach the question without the bias that a prolonged training in Theology or pure Science necessarily impose. I shall not, therefore, attempt to formulate the present Theological position of Evangelicals nor yet their present scientific outlook, but rather the relationship which to my mind should exist between Theology and Science in the life and thought of Evangelical Christendom. Incidentally it would hardly be illuminating if I dwelt at length on the present scientific outlook of Evangelicals for it is all too true that the Science proclaimed from the pulpits is usually ten years out of date. It is this fact which has alienated not a few of the real Scientific thinkers who have watched the Don Quixote antics of some of the champions of Evangelical Theology, as they have tilted at imaginary windmills of supposed scientific opposition to Theology and have found little to edify them in the sight. Neither shall I spend time in enlarging upon the present Scientific position with regard to the Bible for our subject is altogether larger than this and much valuable time has been spent by Evangelicals in fighting outworn scientific theories which appeared contrary to Scripture or in trying to defend untenable positions with regard to the Bible. Let me hasten to add at this juncture, lest I should be suspected

of being a wolf in sheep's clothing that I believe the Bible. After ten years' work in several of the Sciences I can say in all honesty that I am more than ever convinced that the Scriptures are God's uniquely inspired revelation to man, and that the Bible not only contains the Word of God but *is* the word of God even to the controlling by God's Spirit of the words used by the human writers. If you wish me to go further I accept it as infallible and I know of no well-established scientific fact which proves it to be the contrary. Theologians however do not share the same infallibility and have not infrequently been guilty of mistakes which have justly called down the wrath of the Scientists, and God has often used scientific discoveries to force theologians to leave their speculations and additions to the Word of God and return to what the Bible actually says and not what they thought it said or what they chose to make it say.

I remember very vividly as a very small boy in a Prep. school vigorously defending as I thought the veracity of the Bible against the scientific heresy of the teacher who suggested that the Flood possibly only affected a portion of the earth's surface corresponding with the then known world. Stoutly I maintained that the Bible said the whole earth and this must mean the whole geographical globe. My defence I fear earned only the tolerant amusement of my teacher and in much the same way the true Scientist is often alienated by those champions of the Faith who fight so fiercely and relentlessly over irrelevant issues or untenable positions. I may say that in my work I have been brought into contact with men in the first rank of scientific thought and have always found them careful in their pronouncements regarding religion. If not Christians they have at least been reverent agnostics.

With this by way of preface let us proceed to our subject; and that we may have some sure ground from which to start I propose to read a few verses from God's Word to be found in 1 Cor. ii. With these words in our mind let us proceed to two definitions which a proper understanding of our subject demands, namely those of Theology and Science.

I

The word *Scientia* means literally "learning" or "knowledge", and has now come to mean an "ordered knowledge of Natural Phenomena, and the relations between them" usually,

and in this paper, short for Natural Science. Its method to quote Bacon is to "collect and tabulate facts with a view to the detection of relations and reference of effects to causes". The Scientist persistently adopts the observer attitude in his studies which are wholly objective, and he works on the assumption that the Universe must be intelligible and capable of being grasped by knowledge derived through the channels of the senses and by deductive reasoning based thereon.

Theology means literally the Science which deals with God and will be taken in this paper to mean the Theology of the Christian Church. By this we mean not the vast accumulation of Christian teaching which the Churches chose to give as official but true Dogmatic Theology. With regard to method, the Systematic Theology of the Protestant type recognizes the Word of God, interpreted by the Holy Spirit as the sole source of its knowledge of the Divine, so that the relation of Science and the Bible looms large in the discussion but does not cover it entirely for Science calls into question the validity of Religious experience and of phases of Systematic Theology other than its Source.

The Theologian believes the Universe to be intelligible only as it is regarded as being God-centred and he bases his knowledge, not on evidence which is appreciated by the senses but primarily on a revelation given from God received by the exercise of faith. The Theologian is not concerned with the objective in his study; he cannot adopt the observer attitude towards God any more than a man may get to know his friend merely by observing him as an object; the Theologian is concerned with the personal and moral relationship between God and himself and this is on another dimensional plane altogether to the observer attitude of the scientist. Thus it is that the controversy between Science and Theology has ranged round the ideas of Faith and Reason, or Revealed religion and natural religion. The scientist in his search for natural religion finds God in the trees and the running brooks, but when he has searched and observed and tabulated there still comes to him the question which came to Job long ago: "Canst thou by searching find out God? canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? It is as high as heaven what canst thou do? deeper than hell—what canst thou know? The measure thereof is longer than the earth and broader than the sea."

God cannot be cribbed and cabined within the measure of man's mind, as it is written: "Eye hath not seen nor ear heard neither have entered into the heart of man the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him, but God hath revealed them unto us by His Spirit for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. For what man knoweth the things of a man save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God that we might know the things which are freely given unto us of God. Which things also we speak not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth: comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them for they are spiritually discerned." These words show us that the knowledge of God is in the realm of the spiritual and moral and can only thus be understood. Since Faith is the means by which the individual Christian appropriates the revelation and Faith is the gift of God, the truly Christian Theologian is at a disadvantage in seeking to discuss the Christian revelation with the non-Christian Scientist, for the Christian's knowledge and experience lie in a dimension to which the pure Scientist with his observer attitude is a stranger. Have you ever, I wonder, tried to describe the beauties of nature to a man born blind; it is not an easy task; for the man lacks that faculty imparted by a sensitive retina co-ordinated with a nervous mechanism whereby he is able to appreciate the dimensions of space, the colours of objects, and the glories of God's Creation. Even so the Scientist in his search for God arrives only at Natural Religion which Pantheistically identifies the Creator with His Creation, for he lacks that essential faculty of faith without which the Spiritual realm must be forever in an unknown dimension. Yes, God is a father to be trusted and not a problem to be solved. The blind man has his own world, which is best known to himself and into which no one with the gift of sight can ever enter. Now suppose that he suddenly receives the gift of sight the dimension of visibility dawns upon his wondering eyes. In one sense nothing is changed, in another sense everything is changed and has a new meaning. So it is for the Christian

when for the first time he receives the gift of faith and is able to receive the revelation of the Divine. A new dimension has dawned upon him which transforms and colours all the relationships of his life. "Old things are passed away, all things are become new."

Lamont gives us an excellent illustration of this truth in his book *Christ and the World of Thought*. "Imagine", he says, "that a savage unaccustomed to pictures sees the first landscape painting. We see depth and perspective in it because practice has taught us to see it. But he is likely to see everything on the flat. Why should he not see it thus? Everything is on the flat canvas. Our difficulty is to see as he sees it. When he looks at two cows in the picture, one large and one small, he concludes that one is meant to be larger than the other. He informs us that he has never seen such variety in the size of cows. But now suppose that he learns how to look at the picture perspective, some objects being meant to be farther away than others. All of a sudden he sees depth. Everything in the picture is changed for him, though in another sense, there is no change at all. Another dimension has dawned upon him and that which is unintelligible when interpreted two dimensionally finds its explanation when interpreted three dimensionally."

II

The root problem as regards the relationship of Theology and Science is really one of Epistemology or the theory of knowledge. One view says that knowledge can only come to us through the channels of our senses and of deductive reasoning. The other view postulates other sources of knowledge which the Theologian speaks of as revelation which makes its appeal not to the senses primarily but to faith and which the Christian finds summed up in the written Word of God and pre-eminently revealed in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Whichever of these two theories of knowledge has held the field in any generation has largely governed the theology of that generation. Thus we have the rationalistic theologies of Ritschel, Lessing and Schleiermacher who confined reality to the extent of human experience and denied the possibility of any knowledge outside that to be obtained through the senses and by man's unaided reason. This phase of Theology was

possibly merely a reflection of the Scientific outlook of the age. Scientists at the time were very sure of themselves; they felt they held the key to the Universe, and that their knowledge was full and complete and left no room for doubt. We live to-day in a scientific age, but it is an age in which Scientific men are less and less sure of their results, and less and less confident that the scientific method of observation can or will ever explain the Universe. We are living in days when the oldest and best established of scientific theories are being shaken to their foundations; days in which new dimensions are beginning to dawn upon the scientific enquirer, and days in which the earnest scientific observer, probing into the secrets of nature, finds himself on the threshold of the Beyond where reason cannot take him. Scientists are becoming more and more sceptical of the finality of their own conclusions and of the validity of their own methods, and less and less dogmatic in denying the possibility of the existence of other sources of knowledge and other dimensions of experience. This change in the Scientific attitude of our day is perhaps partly responsible for a remarkable swing of the pendulum which we are witnessing in the theological world. I refer to the movement exemplified by K. Barth and his followers. Barthian teaching is a revolt against the complacent Idealism which naively assumed that the content of experience is also the content of reality. Barth sounds out with true missionary zeal the call to repent of our audacious self-reliance and fearlessly to surrender ourselves to the single inescapable Reality,—God, whom experience can never grasp but before whom we can only bow in humility. Barth stresses the Sovereign grace of God and lays emphasis upon the Divine element in Revelation to the exclusion of the human media through which it is received. Thus he says Revelation is never knowledge content which we can claim as our own possession but is something which is imparted to us moment by moment from God as we live in dependence on him. Barthianism leaves us disappointed in that it so dehumanizes the revelation concept that it is difficult to see how revelation can be said to be given at all, while the theology of Lessing and Ritschel does not satisfy us in that such an undue stress was laid upon the human media that the divine content stood in jeopardy of being lost. To quote Professor De Moor writing in the *Evangelical Quarterly* :

“It is a *sine qua non* of an adequate concept of revelation that such a juxtaposition be maintained between the divine content and the human media that the divine be not lost in the human nor the human be lost in the divine. Either error is fatal. The first mistake was committed in the period from Lessing up to the World War. The Barthians are the contemporary illustration of a departure on the other tangent. Broadly speaking the struggle is between Faith and Reason—the Barthians championing the former and the Lessing, Schleiermacher Ritschlian tradition representing the latter cause. The slogan of the first group may be said to be the classical utterance of Tertulian: ‘Credo, quia absurdum est’ and that of the other group the more modern sounding but none the less classical formula of Abelard: ‘Credo ut intelligam.’”

III

Thus we have seen that Theologians have constantly been falling into the error of a one-sided dualism. Is such a position really inevitable? I think not and venture to suggest that the Evangelicals alone hold the key to the solution of the problem of Faith and reason. The two are not antagonistic but complementary, each working within clearly defined boundaries which it may not pass but each contributing its part in a glorious unity. Let me quote Professor Arthur J. Thomson in a debate on “Are Religion and Science Irreconcilable?”:

“No Science and Religion are of a different order. Science describes nature answering the question ‘How?’ While religion interprets nature answering the question, ‘Why?’ The so-called conflict between them is no conflict at all; it is a mistake which arises whenever Science or Religion stretches over its fixed boundaries and attempts to answer questions in the realm of the other. To ask whether a man can be both scientific and religious is as absurd as to doubt whether he can be both mathematical and musical.”

In fact some of the greatest scientists of time have been at the same time the most sincere Christians. It is to that humility of mind which acknowledges its own limitations and imperfections and which is characteristic of true Evangelical Christianity that the greatest advances in Science and Theology come, for God Who is wont to hide the secrets of His Universe from those who are wise in their own conceits is still ready to reveal Himself to those who approach Him in humility and Faith. But it may be said what bearing has all this on the present position of Evangelicals and in closing I want to apply what I have said thus far.

I do not presume to advise or criticize those who are

older in years and wiser in experience than myself but rather would I sound a call to fellow Evangelicals of my own age. The Evangelical position to my mind is the only one which has a future, for it is the only position which gives a satisfactory solution to the fatal dualism we have discussed. To the Evangelical Christian the Universe is a unity with God supremely revealed in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ as its perspective centre. Our knowledge of God is wholly derived by Divine revelation which is apprehended by the gift and faculty of Faith; but once this gift has been received, the whole becomes transformed as a new dimension dawns upon us and is seen in perspective which makes the whole of life Christocentric. There should be no dualism in the attitude of the Evangelical Christian. Life is a whole, body, mind and spirit to be lived wholly unto the Lord who is the centre and supreme Sovereign of all. The title is "The Present Position of Evangelicals". It is in the nature of things that we live and move and have our being in the moving present and, or ever we can consider our present position it has already slipped into the past. Fellow Evangelicals, have we not sometimes erred in dwelling too much in the past; we hear so often reiterated the cry, "Back to the Reformation, Back to the Bible". Rather let our watchword be that given by God to Moses: "Speak to the children of Israel that they go forward." Evangelicals have been living too much on the defensive; true we have a glorious heritage, but we have, if we will but enter in, a far more glorious future for we own allegiance to an unchanging Christ who shall shortly bring all things into subjection to Himself.

Let us not waste our time by trying to bolster up our religion by recourse to scientific proofs. Science can never prove Theology and as someone said to me the other day, "We hear enough scientific lectures during the week without having to listen to a bad one on Sundays". On the other hand let us not be guilty of departmentalizing our lives as, this part religious, and this part secular, but whatsoever we do let us do it heartily as unto the Lord, with an unswerving loyalty to the Christ of the Scriptures as the touchstone and mainspring of our lives. Evangelicals should be in the front rank of theological thought and scientific endeavour, for only they possess the key to an adequate synthesis of life. Let us then

lose our attitude of defensiveness as of those who fight a losing battle, and let us press on with true humility of heart in the steps of St. Paul that great exponent of Evangelic Christology. "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect, but I follow after it that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus."

"Brethren I count not myself to have apprehended, but this one thing I do, forgetting those things that are behind and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

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