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The Lost Scriptural Mind*

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“As the Truth is in Jesus” (Ephesians 4:21).

CHRISTIAN MINISTERS ARE NOT SUPPOSED TO PREACH their private opinions, at least from the pulpit. Ministers are commissioned and ordained in the church precisely to preach the Word of God. They are given some fixed terms of reference— namely, the gospel of Jesus Christ— and they are committed to this sole and perennial message. They are expected to propagate and to sustain “the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.” Of course, the Word of God must be preached “efficiently.” That is, it should always be so presented as to carry conviction and command the allegiance of every new generation and every particular group. It may be restated in new categories, if the circumstances require. But, above all, the identity of the message must be preserved.

One has to be sure that one is preaching the same gospel that was delivered and that one is not introducing instead any “strange gospel” of his own. The Word of God cannot be easily adjusted or accommodated to the fleeting customs and attitudes of any particular age, including our own time. Unfortunately, we are often inclined to measure the Word

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of God by our own stature, instead of checking our mind by the stature of Christ. The “modern mind” also stands under the judgment of the Word of God.

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Modern Man and Scripture

But it is precisely at this point that our major difficulty begins. Most of us have lost the integrity of the scriptural mind, even if some bits of biblical phraseology are retained. The modern man often complains that the truth of God is offered to him in an “archaic idiom”— i.e., in the language of the Bible— which is no more his own and cannot be used spontaneously. It has recently been suggested that we should radically “demythologize” Scripture, meaning to replace the antiquated categories of the Holy Writ by something more modern. Yet the question cannot be evaded: Is the language of Scripture really nothing else than an accidental and external wrapping out of which some “eternal idea” is to be extricated and disentangled, or is it rather a perennial vehicle of the divine message, which was once delivered for all time?

We are in danger of losing the uniqueness of the Word of God in the process of continuous “reinterpretation.” But how can we interpret at all if we have forgotten the original language? Would it not be safer to bend our thought to the mental habits of the biblical language and to relearn the idiom of the Bible? No man can receive the gospel unless he repents “changes his mind.” For in the language of the gospel “repentance” (*metanoieite*) does not mean merely acknowledgment of and contrition for sins, but precisely a “change of mind”— a profound change of man’s mental and emotional attitude, an integral renewal of man’s self, which begins in his self-renunciation and is accomplished and sealed by the Spirit.

We are living now in an age of intellectual chaos and disintegration. Possibly modern man has not yet made up his mind, and the variety of opinions is beyond any hope of reconciliation. Probably the only luminous signpost we have to guide us through the mental fog of our desperate

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age is just the “faith which was once delivered unto the saints,” obsolete or archaic as the idiom of the Early Church may seem to be, judged by our fleeting standards.

Preach the Creeds!

What, then, are we going to preach? What would I preach to my contemporaries “in a time such as this?” There is no room for hesitation: I am going to preach Jesus, and him crucified and risen. I am going to preach and to commend to all whom I may be called to address the message of salvation, as it has been handed down to me by an uninterrupted tradition of the Church Universal. I would not isolate myself in my own age. In other words, I am going to preach the “doctrines of the creed.”

I am fully aware that creeds are a stumbling block for many in our own generation. “The creeds are venerable symbols, like the tattered flags upon the walls of national churches; but for the present warfare of the church in Asia, in Africa, in Europe and America the creeds, when they are understood, are about as serviceable as a battle-ax or an arquebus in the hands of a modern soldier.” This was written some years ago by a prominent British scholar who is a devout minister too. Possibly he would not write them

today. But there are still many who would wholeheartedly make this vigorous statement their own. Let us remember, however, that the early creeds were deliberately scriptural, and it is precisely their scriptural phraseology that makes them difficult for the modern man.

Thus we face the same problem again: What can we offer instead of Holy Scripture? I would prefer the language of the Tradition, not because of a lazy and credulous “conservatism” or a blind “obedience” to some external “authorities,” but simply because I cannot find any better phraseology. I am prepared to expose myself to the inevitable charge of being “antiquarian” and “fundamentalist.” And I would protest that such a charge is gratuitous and wrong. I do keep and hold the “doctrines of the creed,” conscientiously and wholeheartedly, because I apprehend by faith their

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perennial adequacy and relevance to all ages and to all situations, including “a time such as this.” And I believe it is precisely the “doctrines of the creed” that can enable a desperate generation like ours to regain Christian courage and vision.

The Tradition Lives

“The church is neither a museum of dead deposits nor a society of research.” The deposits are alive— *depositum juvenescens*, to use the phrase of St. Irenaeus. The creed is not a relic of the past, but rather the “sword of the Spirit.” The reconversion of the world to Christianity is what we have to preach in our day. This is the only way out of that impasse into which the world has been driven by the failure of Christians to be truly Christian. Obviously, Christian doctrine does not answer *directly* any practical question in the field of politics or economics. Neither does the gospel of Christ. Yet its impact on the whole course of human history has been enormous. The recognition of human dignity, mercy and justice roots in the gospel. The new world can be built only by a new man.

What Chalcedon Meant

“And was made man.” What is the ultimate connotation of this creedal statement? Or, in other words, *who* was Jesus, the Christ and the Lord? What does it mean, in the language of the Council of Chalcedon, that the same Jesus was “perfect man” and “perfect God,” yet a single and unique personality? “Modern man” is usually very critical of that definition of Chalcedon. It fails to convey any meaning to him. The “imagery” of the creed is for him nothing more than a piece of poetry, if anything at all. The whole approach, I think, is wrong. The “definition” of Chalcedon is not a metaphysical statement, and was never meant to be treated as such. Nor was the mystery of the Incarnation just a “metaphysical miracle.” The formula of Chalcedon was a statement of faith, and therefore cannot be understood when taken out

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of the total experience of the church. In fact, it is an “existential statement.”

Chalcedon's formula is, as it were, an intellectual contour of the mystery which is apprehended by faith. Our Redeemer is *not* a man, but God *himself*. Here lies the existential emphasis of the statement. Our Redeemer is one who "came down" and who, by "being made man," identified himself with men in the fellowship of a truly human life and nature. Not only the initiative was divine, but the Captain of Salvation was a divine Person. The fullness of the human nature of Christ means simply the adequacy and truth of this redeeming identification. God enters human history and becomes a historical person.

This sounds paradoxical. Indeed there is a mystery: "And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness; God was manifested in the flesh." But this mystery was a revelation; the true character of God had been disclosed in the Incarnation. God was so much and so intimately concerned with the destiny of man (and precisely with the destiny of every one of "the little ones") as to intervene *in person* in the chaos and misery of the lost life. The divine providence therefore is not merely an omnipotent ruling of the universe from an august distance by the divine majesty, but a kenosis, a "self-humiliation" of the God of glory. There is a *personal* relationship between God and man.

Tragedy in a New Light

The whole of the human tragedy appears therefore in a new light. The mystery of the Incarnation was a mystery of the love divine, of the divine identification with lost man. And the climax of Incarnation was the cross. It is the turning point of human destiny. But the awful mystery of the cross is comprehensible only in the wider perspective of an integral Christology; that is, only if we believe that the Crucified was in very truth "the Son of the living God." The death of Christ was God's entrance into the misery of human death (again *in person*), a descent into Hades, and

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this meant the end of death and the inauguration of life everlasting for man.

There is an amazing coherence in the body of the traditional doctrine. But it can be apprehended and understood only in the living context of faith, by which I mean in a personal communion with the personal God. Faith alone makes formulas convincing; faith alone makes formulas live. "It seems paradoxical, yet it is the experience of all observers of spiritual things: no one profits by the Gospels unless he be first in love with Christ." For Christ is not a text but a living Person, and he abides in his body, the church.

A New Nestorianism

It may seem ridiculous to suggest that one should preach the doctrine of Chalcedon "in a time such as this." Yet it is precisely this doctrine—that reality to which this doctrine bears witness—that can change the whole spiritual outlook of modern man. It brings him a true freedom. Man is not alone in this world, and God is taking personal interest in the events of human history. This is an immediate implication of the integral conception of the Incarnation. It is an illusion that the Christological disputes of the past are irrelevant to the contemporary situation. In fact, they are continued and repeated in the

controversies of our own age. Modern man, deliberately or subconsciously, is tempted by the Nestorian extreme. That is to say, he does not take the Incarnation in earnest. He does not dare to believe that Christ is a divine person. He wants to have a *human* redeemer, only assisted by God. He is more interested in human psychology of the Redeemer than in the mystery of the divine love. Because, in the last resort, he believes optimistically in the dignity of man

A New Monophysitism

On the other extreme we have in our days a revival of “monophysite” tendencies in theology and religion, when man is reduced to complete passivity and is allowed only

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to listen and to hope’ The present tension between “liberalism” and “neo-orthodoxy” is in fact a re-enactment of the old Christological struggle, on a new existential level and in a new spiritual key. The conflict will never be settled or solved in the field of theology, unless a wider vision is acquired.

In the early church the preaching was emphatically theological. It was not a vain speculation. The New Testament itself is a theological book. Neglect of theology in the instruction given to laity in modern times is responsible both for the decay of personal religion and for that sense of frustration which dominates the modern mood. What we need in Christendom “in a time such as this” is precisely a sound and existential theology. In fact, both clergy and the laity are hungry for theology. And because no theology is usually preached, they adopt some “strange ideologies” and combine them with the fragments of traditional beliefs. The whole appeal of the “rival gospel” in our days is that they offer some sort of pseudo theology, a system of pseudo dogmas. They are gladly accepted by those who cannot find any theology in the reduced Christianity of “modern” style. That existential alternative which many face in our days has been aptly formulated by an English theologian, “Dogma or... death.” The age of a-dogmatism and pragmatism has closed. And therefore the ministers of the church have to preach again doctrines and dogmas— the Word of God.

The Modern Crisis

The first task of the contemporary preacher is the “reconstruction of belief.” It is by no means an intellectual endeavor. Belief is just the map of the true world, and should not be mistaken for reality. Modern man has been too much concerned with his own ideas and convictions, his own attitudes and reactions. The modern crisis precipitated by humanism (an undeniable fact) has been brought about by the rediscovery of the real world, in which we do believe. The rediscovery of the church is the most decisive aspect of this new spiritual realism. Reality is no more screened from

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us by the wall of our own ideas. It is again accessible. It is again realized that the church is not just a company of believers, but the “Body of Christ.” This is a rediscovery of a

new dimension, a rediscovery of the continuing presence of the divine Redeemer in the midst of his faithful flock. This discovery throws a new flood of light on the misery of our disintegrated existence in a world thoroughly secularized. It is already recognized by many that the true solution of all social problems lies somehow in the reconstruction of the church. "In a time such as this" one has to preach the "whole Christ," Christ and the church— *totus Christus, caput et corpus*, to use the famous phrase of St. Augustine. Possibly this preaching is still unusual, but it seems to be the only way to preach the Word of God efficiently in a period of doom and despair like ours.

The Relevance of the Fathers

I have often a strange feeling. When I read the ancient classics of Christian theology, the fathers of the church, I find them more relevant to the troubles and problems of my own time than the production of modern theologians. The fathers were wrestling with existential problems, with those revelations of the eternal issues which were described and recorded in Holy Scripture. I would risk a suggestion that St. Athanasius and St. Augustine are much more up to date than many of our theological contemporaries. The reason is very simple: they were dealing with things and not with the maps, they were concerned not so much with what man can believe as with what God had done for man. We have, "in a time such as this," to enlarge our perspective, to acknowledge the masters of old, and to attempt for our own age an existential synthesis of Christian experience.