

to take possession of him. People came from considerable distances to worship him, to "ask petitions" (cf. Dan. vi. 7), to seek cures; and at his feet as a god they laid their offerings of incense and gifts.

J. M. FULLER.

*King's College, London.*

---

*THE AIM, IMPORTANCE, DIFFICULTIES, AND  
BEST METHOD, OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY.*

FOURTH PAPER.

IN previous papers I have endeavoured to show that the true aim of Systematic Theology is to reproduce, amid the infinite imperfection of all human knowledge of the Divine, yet as correctly and as fully as we can, Christ's own conception touching Himself and His work. This we sought to do by careful study and comparison of the conceptions of Christ reflected in the extant writings of His earliest followers.

Our method was that of strict historical research. We nowhere assumed infallible or special authority for the Bible; but we tested its authority and trustworthiness according to the principles of human credibility. Nor did we take account of the opinions touching Christ and His work held by His followers in later ages.

The results of this study, each student will determine for himself. To me, the manifold and far-reaching harmony, underlying very marked diversities in detail, in the New Testament, is abundant proof that these writings are a correct report of the teaching of Christ; and for His disciples' confident assurance that He rose from the dead, and for the effect upon the world of their assurance, I can

account only by believing that He actually rose. And if so, the Christian Scriptures occupy a place of honour and of authority absolutely unique in the literature of the world.

These findings are, however, no essential part of the method suggested in these papers. They have approved themselves to the mass of the students of the Bible. And I have stated them here because I wish to compare them, and thus to compare the method advocated here, with the judgments touching Christ and His teaching pronounced by His followers in later ages and embodied in the creeds and other documents of the Christian Church. In other words, we will consider now the relation between Biblical Systematic Theology and Dogma.

Of this last word, the uses are so various, and the confusion and injury caused by this variety have been so great, that I shall at once define, and endeavour to justify, the sense in which I use it. By Dogma I mean a formulated statement, claiming to be accepted as true, not because of argument adduced, but because of the authority asserting it. Of Dogma, thus understood, familiar examples are the creeds of Nicæa and Constantinople, and the definition of faith of Calcedon, and the decrees and canons of the Council of Trent. In this last, proofs from the Bible are frequently adduced; e.g. *Decretum de Justificatione* (in Session vi.), chs. 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 16. But even where no proofs are given, the Council claims absolute authority, and pronounces anathema on all who contradict its judgments. Or, in a looser yet appropriate sense, the word Dogma may be used for all formulated statements put forth by an authority recognised in any section of the universal Church, and resting not upon proof adduced but on the authority asserting them; even though the assertions make no claim to be infallible truth. Such formulas are merely convenient embodiments of theological opinions held in common by

men associated in the fellowship of some one Church. A well-known example is the *Westminster Confession of Faith*.

The above uses of the word Dogma agree well with its original significance. The derivation of the word suggests something which commends itself to some man or men as good, but about whose intrinsic goodness the speaker pronounces no judgment. So Xenophon, *Cyropædia*, bk. vi. 2. 9, *δεδογμένον . . . τοῖς συμμάχοις . . . ἕκαστον παρῆναι*; and Thucydides, bk. iii. 36, *ἄγγελον τῶν δεδογμένων*. In these places, as in many others, the word simply tells us the course of action which it *seemed good* to the persons in question to adopt. The perfect tense directs attention to the abiding result of their decision. From this perfect tense is derived the word *δόγμα*; which in Luke ii. 1, as in xvii. 7, according to a common usage, denotes a decree issued by the authority of the Roman emperor. In Acts xvi. 4 it denotes the formulated judgments of the Apostles and Elders at Jerusalem about the matter referred to them by the Church at Antioch; which decisions Paul and Silas "committed to" the Churches of Derbe and Lystra, "to keep."<sup>1</sup> In Ephesians ii. 15 and Colossians ii. 14 (20), the word denotes the various commands of the Law given to Moses. The expressed opinions of the Greek philosophers are frequently by Plutarch and others called dogmas. Similarly, in Ignatius, *To the Magnesians*, ch. 13, we read of "the dogmas of the Lord and of the Apostles." This last use became not uncommon in later Christian writers.

Using the word Dogma in this last sense, Preb. Meyrick, in a work entitled, *Is Dogma a Necessity?* speaks on p. 61 f. and elsewhere of "the dogmas of revelation," with which he declares "the dogmas of the Church Catholic and of the Church of England" to be "identical." Now it is quite true that Christ made assertions about Himself and His work resting simply on His own Divine authority. With

<sup>1</sup> Acts xvi. 4.

such assertions the Fourth Gospel abounds; *e.g.* chs. iii. 16, v. 24, xi. 25, 26. In proof of them He appealed to His miracles: John x. 25, 37, 38. In this sense then the promises and declarations of Christ may be called "dogmas of revelation."

While admitting this, it seems to me that this mode of expression is in the highest degree unsuitable. For between the recorded words of Jesus and the assertions of a creed the difference is infinite. The one is the voice of God; the other, the voice of man. Even between the words of Jesus and the decrees of the Ancient Law of God, the difference is absolute; for the one is the immediate channel of life eternal to all who believe it, whereas the other cannot save except by forcing us to the gospel. Differences so wide ought not to be obscured by a common designation. For common designation is very apt to suggest actual similarity. Of this tendency, the book quoted above affords throughout a conspicuous example. To avoid confusion tending to serious error, we shall do well to use the word Dogma only for the formal declarations of the Church and the Churches.

Inasmuch as the theological declarations of the Church have almost always assumed compact and definite form, all compact and definite statements of Christian doctrine are apt to be called Dogma; even when they are only a convenient summing up of Biblical research, and claim no authority whatever except that of the proofs by which they are supported. Of such compact and definite statements, the enunciations of Euclid are, in another department of knowledge, an excellent example. And such statements are a most important element in the exact sciences. But in these sciences Dogma has no place. We accept the formulated statements in Euclid's *Elements* and in Newton's *Principia*, not because of the authority asserting them, but simply because of the proofs therein adduced. Our belief

of them would remain absolutely untouched, even if it were discovered that neither Euclid nor Newton ever existed, or that many of their other opinions were both mistaken and absurd. Similarly, in many great works on theology we have most exact and valuable generalisations of Christian truth, which we accept, not because of the fame of the author, but because of the proofs which support them. These formulated generalisations must therefore, in spite of similarity in outward form, be carefully distinguished from Dogma.

Overlooking altogether this wide distinction, Mr. Meyrick, on p. 2, speaks of "the dogmas of the physical sciences"; which he defines to be "those universal affirmative propositions that are arrived at by experimental inductions"; and of "the dogmas of mathematics," quoting as examples "the axioms of geometry and arithmetic." On p. 154 he calls Newton's great generalisation "the dogma of gravitation." But the axioms of geometry differ altogether from the law of gravitation. The former are the beginning, the latter is the end, of a long course of research. They have little in common, except that they are absolutely certain, are capable of exact statement, and are accepted for sure reasons altogether independent of the authority asserting them. In this last point they differ altogether from "religious dogma," which Mr. Meyrick appropriately defines on p. 5 to be "a proposition regarding God or our relations towards Him, enunciated by authority, and resting on authority rather than on evidence, or on consciousness, for its sanction." This confusion arises from using the word dogma for a formulated statement of whatever kind.

To proclaim to all mankind Christ's assertions touching Himself and His salvation is a chief part of the work committed by Christ to His Church. And only thus can the Church hold out to the world the Light of Life. And this is probably what Mr. Meyrick means by saying on p. 165

that Dogma is of the very essence of Christianity, and that the Church cannot possibly do the work assigned to it except by being dogmatic. But we have already seen that the words of Jesus ought not to be called Dogma. Consequently, to re-echo them in her own language is not to teach Dogma. Moreover the Church is bound to use language which men will recognise as equivalent to the actual words of Christ; for on this felt equivalence rests the authority of the living voice. She has no right to ask us to take for granted, even when using the language of the early creeds, that her words are the words of Christ; for we have no proof, in the promises of Christ or elsewhere, that the declarations, even of a Council of the universal Church, are infallible truth.

The fundamental error of Mr. Meyrick's book is found on the first page. He says, "*αὐτὸς ἔφα* is a good argument with a disciple, but a man must first feel and acknowledge himself a disciple before he will submit to the Master's dictum. . . . When that relationship has been brought about, dogmatizing on the part of the superior ceases to be an offence, and at the same moment argument becomes often mere surplusage." All this is true of One Great Teacher. Yet He condescended to give abundant proof of His Divine authority. But any human teacher who gives only assertions, and looks upon argument as "mere surplusage," thereby proves himself utterly untrustworthy and unfit to teach.<sup>1</sup>

It has been often said that the Divine authority of the

<sup>1</sup> For an example of "pseudo-dogma" Mr. Meyrick is compelled to go outside the Anglican Church. On p. 98 he says, "the Dogma that the new birth is the result of, or synonymous with, an excitement of feeling, and that it places the persons who have gone through that excitement of feeling at once in a state of perfection, is not a dogma of revelation, but a Wesleyan dogma." In the exact sense of the term, the Wesleyan Church has no Dogma. For its doctrinal standards are not in the shape of formula: nor do its ministers bind themselves to accept all the statements therein contained, but at their ordination merely declare their belief, referring to certain works of Wesley,

Bible rests upon the testimony of the Church, and that therefore, apart from the authority of the Church, we have no proof that the Gospel is true; and also that the Bible needs an infallible interpreter. But I have in my last paper endeavoured to show that, apart from Church authority, we have absolute historical proof that the New Testament contains a correct record of the teaching of Christ. And it seems to me that the various types of apostolic teaching therein preserved are sufficient by their harmony to banish doubt in all matters vital to the Christian life. Certainly, where after careful study of the New Testament doubt remains, it is not likely to be dispelled by study of the creeds or by Church authority.

It is also right to say that the ancient creeds reproduce very imperfectly the Gospel of Christ. Beautiful and valuable as they are, they fail altogether to set forth salvation by faith, and the Holy Spirit dwelling in the hearts of all who believe the Gospel, as these vital doctrines are taught in the New Testament. There are many single verses in the Fourth Gospel and in St. Paul's Epistles, which describe the way of salvation more fully and in a form more intelligible to the unlearned than do all the creeds together.

The true worth of Dogma is to confirm, or to suggest caution about, the doctrinal results obtained by independent study of the New Testament. It is best, when approaching the words of Christ and His Apostles, to forget the judg-

“that the system of doctrine therein contained is in accordance with Holy Scripture.” The doctrine called by Mr. Meyrick a Wesleyan dogma is, not only not taught in these standard works, but is therein plainly and repeatedly and emphatically contradicted.\* Evidently, without any occasion, and without any investigation, he has charged with serious theological error and folly an important branch of the Church of Christ. By thus bearing false witness against his brethren, unwittingly, yet inexcusably, he is erecting a barrier of misunderstanding between members of the one family of God, and rending the seamless robe of Christ.

\* See especially Sermon XIII. *On Sin in Believers.*

ments of later ages, and to receive in our minds as on a clean sheet the impress of their recorded teaching. When we have done this, we shall do well to compare our results with the judgments of the Church. If these confirm our own findings, this confirmation will greatly strengthen our confidence in them. If the results of our own research are contradicted by the voice of the Church, we shall be warned to examine very carefully the grounds on which rest our own contrary judgments. We shall thus be guarded from undue influence of our own subjective opinion. But the final decision must rest with ourselves.

Some of the many and various objections to Dogma now demand notice. We may fairly object to it when infallible authority is claimed for the judgments of the Church, that is, when creeds are put in place of exposition of the words of Christ, or in place of historical proof that the New Testament is a true record of His life and teaching. Such intellectual submission no Church has a right to demand: for no Church can prove its creeds to be infallible truth. And, as we have seen, such submission is not needful for absolute certainty that the Gospel is in very truth the voice and word of God.

On the other hand, not a few persons object to all definite statements touching God and Christ and our relation to God, on the ground that moral teaching is all we need. This is really an objection to God's method of saving men by faith in the promises which fell from the lips of Christ, which promises we could not intelligently believe, did we not believe His doctrinal statements touching Himself and His work. Many of the recorded sayings of Jesus are formulas of teaching, as compact and definite as any creed, and infinitely more precious. This is an objection, not to Dogma, but to Christianity, to the earnest teaching of Paul and John and Christ.

We can now answer the question, "Is Dogma a neces-

sity?" As understood above, it is not necessary to personal salvation; for so definite is the recorded teaching of Christ, especially in the Fourth Gospel, that a careful and loving study of it is abundantly sufficient for all our spiritual needs. Nor is Dogma absolutely needful even for the highest and richest knowledge of God and the things of God attainable by man; for this may be obtained by loving and prayerful use of modern scientific methods, from the recorded words of Jesus and His Apostles. To a knowledge of Christian truth thus derived, the creeds can add nothing. But the earnest student will unconsciously construct dogmas of his own—*i.e.* his opinions about Christ and His work will inevitably assume in his mind definite form; and to compare his own definite conceptions of the Gospel with the formulated statements of the Church will be a most valuable safeguard to the unfettered independence of his own researches. On the other hand, creeds will do harm to any who rest satisfied with a knowledge of the Gospel derived from them; and to any who, instead of surrendering themselves implicitly to the supreme authority of the teaching of Christ and His Apostles, as recorded and preserved in the New Testament, study this teaching with a mental reserve that no results of their study shall contradict the ancient formulas—to such students Dogma is a veritable and degrading bondage.

This series of papers I shall conclude by a few words about the prospects and promises of theological science. What progress may we expect, and what practical results?

It has often been said, and said with confidence, as not needing proof, that by its very nature theology can do no more than repeat from age to age its old assertions, or at best show their adaptation to the ever-changing course of human thought and life. I claim that theology

has prospects of progress and of acquisition of new truth as full of promise as the natural sciences, and that it promises to mankind far greater enrichment and benefit than they.

It is useless to say that no one now can know as much about the Gospel as did the immediate disciples of Christ. Indeed, in some measure, St. Paul is himself a disproof of this. Moreover, long ago the Apostles have vanished from earth; consequently, progress in theology must be measured, not from their standpoint, but from that of the next generation, and from our own theological position to-day. Truths previously unknown to us are to us new truths: consequently, to reproduce the Apostle's conception of the Gospel is to go forward; for how far below that conception later teachers have fallen, the literature of succeeding ages testifies.

Moreover, I am not sure that we need admit the theoretical impossibility of a teacher in our own day obtaining a knowledge of Christ as full and rich as was enjoyed by the greatest of the Apostles. God may raise up in His Church an intellect as profound, animated by a devotion as unreserved, as was that of St. Paul. A glance as piercing as his would see in the Gospel glass a picture of Christ as complete and glorious as that beheld by the Apostle; and a man in our days would have the advantage of observing God's work in the Gospel during the many centuries of Christianity.

Certainly each student may hope to obtain, by continued study of the New Testament, a clearer view of Christ. And while using methods of research matured by their predecessors, each generation of scholars may hope to obtain a broader and deeper comprehension of the Gospel than was possible to men of an earlier day. Thus, as in the individual student, so in the Christian family as a whole, there may be progress in knowledge of things Divine.

Certainly, continued examination and comparison of the phenomena of Christianity will give, to men and to communities, a deeper and broader view of the eternal realities underlying them.

Indeed, it is not too much to say that already such progress may be traced. Few Biblical works fifty years old are recommended to students now, and doctrines taught within memory of men now living would hardly be tolerated to-day. Of such doctrines, an outrageous example is the teaching, common in the last generation, and asserted even by the great Augustine, that some who die in infancy, especially those unbaptized, are numbered among the lost. The discredit cast by such teaching on Christianity cannot be over-estimated. The progress which has made it impossible is therefore a proportionate gain.

Similarly, we may hope that progress in theological research will remove other misrepresentations of the Gospel which still cling, as we dare not doubt, even to the most accurate presentations of its profound mysteries; and thus remove hindrances to its wider acceptance.

Again, inasmuch as the moral and spiritual influence of the Gospel depends upon intelligent comprehension of it, theological research will, by affording a richer and fuller knowledge of Christ, produce also, in individuals and communities, a richer spiritual life. This has been already abundantly exemplified in the experience of many, who, while patiently contemplating, with ravished gaze, the image of Christ reflected in the Gospel mirror, have felt more and more its transforming power. We may hope that similar results, in greater degree, will follow in the Church as a whole.

Once more. Theological research presents a hope, the only rational hope, of harmony and unity among the various sections of the universal Church. Some would like to solve the problem of Church union by suggesting

or insisting that all Christians, at least those in their own country, should join their own Church. Union in this method is rendered impossible by theological differences between earnest and sincere Christian men. Fidelity to what they believed to be important truth compelled a multitude of godly and learned men to submit, on St. Bartholomew's Day, A.D. 1662, to expulsion from their livings, rather than declare their assent to everything contained in the Anglican Prayer-Book. And their expulsion left them no choice except to form themselves into Churches outside the dominant Church. And similar reasons, with others not less strong, now forbid many Christian men to exchange the forms of Christian communion in which they have found spiritual life for those of the Anglican Church. In other words, differences of opinion in matters theological forbid external union, and, unfortunately, in some cases prevent harmonious co-operation; and theological differences imply, on one side or other, theological error.

Now we cannot doubt that theological research will give a fuller and more exact knowledge of Gospel truth. And just as error hinders progress in knowledge of the truth, so progress in knowledge will overthrow error. We may therefore hope that theological research will weaken, and in time break down, the barriers which now hinder Christian harmony and co-operation. Every step of approach to the truth will bring us nearer to our brethren in Christ.

To bring about this result, the method of research advocated in these papers is specially adapted. The questions at issue are raised above the confusion of ecclesiastical debate and rival Churches to the cooler atmosphere of grammatical and historical investigation. And thus, although our judgment, even in matters of grammar and history, is influenced by ecclesiastical prepossessions, the distorting influence is reduced to a minimum.

The tendency towards harmony of Christians and unity of Christian belief, fostered by modern Biblical scholarship, is very conspicuous in the Biblical literature of our own day. The harmony on the chief points of Christian belief between scholars of different Churches is such that the variety of their ecclesiastical position is hardly or not at all perceptible; and the common effort for a common gain, viz. for a deeper and fuller knowledge of the eternal realities, is a bond of closest brotherhood. Of all this, the pages of this Magazine afford a conspicuous example. Moreover, the comparative unanimity already attained among theological scholars cannot fail to mould in time the opinions of the Churches to which they belong.

To sum up. We have seen that Theology is prompted by phenomena around and within us, of the highest importance, which cannot be explained by anything belonging to the visible world; and which thus reveal the existence of an unseen world above and around and before us. The aim of Systematic Theology is to learn all we can about this unseen world. Our method of research is strictly scientific. We investigate and compare whatever phenomena come under our observation, and endeavour to look through them to the broad underlying principles. Our research soon assumes an historic direction, and brings us into the presence of a Teacher whose influence has changed the entire current of human thought and life. Our task then is to reproduce, as fully and accurately as possible, His teaching about Himself and His work. And this we shall do best by studying consecutively and comparing the conceptions of Him embodied in the extant writings of His early followers. The results of our research we shall be able in great part to verify by observing their effect in our own inner life and by observing the social life around us. And we shall compare them with the various declarations of the Church and the Churches

---

touching Christ and the Gospel. From this course of study we hope to derive a clearer and more accurate view of Christ, working in us a greater likeness to Him; a removal of the misconceptions which weaken the influence of the Gospel and hinder its reception, and of the barriers which still separate those whom Christ has joined together in one great brotherhood.

JOSEPH AGAR BEET.

---

MEYER.

SECOND PAPER.

To the critical adjustment of the text which was to form the basis of his exposition he attached great importance, and lamented the indifference of the younger generation of theologians towards textual criticism. He took his statement of the facts at first from Scholz, but afterwards from Tischendorf's successive issues, which were carefully collated. In this field specially we miss such a general account of the principles on which he proceeded as he contemplated giving at the end of the work; and we cannot but think that the absence of such an account has led to an undue disparagement of the critical side of his labours. Men accustomed to the methods of Griesbach, Lachmann, Tregelles, or Westcott and Hort—to say nothing of the more varying principles and practice of Tischendorf—look with impatience or suspicion on a criticism that rests on no precisely stated theory as to documents or recensions; and the reader is apt, in the absence of any such definite guiding thread, to assume that the judgments expressed on individual passages are unequal and arbitrary. But the judgments of Meyer are by no means mere subjective expressions of opinion; on the contrary, it is his special distinction to indicate plainly in each case the grounds that