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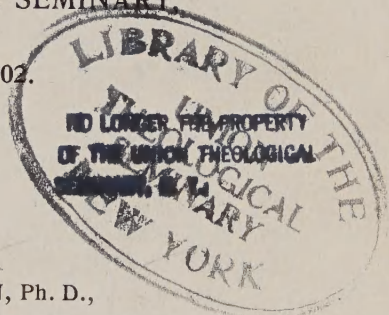
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THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF THE
THEOLOGICAL STUDENT.

An Address delivered at the Mid-Winter Conference,
AUBURN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY.

JANUARY 30, 1902.



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THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF THE THEOLOGICAL STUDENT.

I thank you for the privilege of meeting with you in this Conference, and being admitted to take part in its discussions. The relations between Auburn and Union have long been so friendly, that I count it a pleasure to be able, even in this small way, to be the mouthpiece of our feelings of fraternal regard and esteem. Fellow-workers, all of us, in the one great cause, we cannot stand or feel too close together.

I am to speak to you of the spiritual life of the theological student. The words need closer definition. You have not asked me to come here, I am sure, simply that I may repeat to you what is already familiar, or urge upon you again the cultivation of habits of devotion, whose importance you have long recognized; but rather that we should think our way a little more deeply into the heart of the religious life, that so we may gain a clearer vision of the end we seek, and be able to judge more wisely the means which will help us to attain it.

Such rethinking of old themes is constantly necessary. Phrases are like plants which, unless continually renewed by contact with the soil from which they spring, tend to dry up and wither. The words in which our subject is expressed, once instinct with life, have acquired a cant meaning from which it must be our first business to free them. What is a theological student? Not simply—as men often think of him—a man who has entered a Seminary that he may gain a technical training for a profession, which, however honorable, no longer holds the unique place in the public estimation which once it did; but a man whose supreme interest and study it is to know God. And the spiritual life—what is it? Not simply a little section of experience which we mark off from the rest of life by its devotion to the outward forms of religion, prayer, meditation, the reading of the Bible, or even the cultivation of some mystic form of piety, as in the cloister or the retreat; but every form of experience through which we gain and enlarge

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our knowledge of God. To study the spiritual life of the theological student then, in the full meaning of the words, is to inquire what are the methods by which we may gain, and having gained, may deepen and enrich our experimental knowledge of God.

You see the largeness of our theme. It is no petty matter which engages us—no technical or professional enquiry, having a meaning only within the Seminary walls. It is a question profoundly human, having an interest for every man who loves his kind, and who would know the answer to the last great question which every true man asks. The presence of more than one here whose academic training has long been over, proves that I am not wrong in thinking that there is a theological school which is broader than the Seminary, and contains many a student whose name is not written on its rolls.

And yet the Seminary has its own peculiar difficulties; temptations growing out of the special conditions which the technical school creates, and which—if the same in principle as those which beset earnest men everywhere—are not felt by men outside in quite the same way. You will not blame me if, in speaking of the larger theme, I have constantly in mind the special audience out of whose needs this Conference has grown.

How then shall we know the God of Whom we speak? Our question is not theoretical, but practical, personal. How shall we gain that experience of God out of which assurance comes; that experience which gives definiteness to preaching, and joy to testimony. What are the hindrances which stand in the way of its attainment? What are the helps which lie ready to our hand? And how may we overcome the first and lay hold upon the second? These are the questions which are to engage our morning's thought.

Of the hindrances, some lie on the surface. They are inherent, perennial, growing out of the nature of the object we seek to know, and the limitations and weakness of our humanity. Others are transient, having their birth in the changing conditions, needing for their diagnosis and cure some understanding of the movement of the times of which we are a part. I will speak of but three. Put in the personal form which is here alone appropriate, we may call them inertia, selfishness, unbelief.

And first inertia. Among the obstacles to a sound knowledge of God, I do not think this hindrance receives the attention it deserves. It is not easy to know God. How can it be? God is the

supreme reality of the universe, the final truth of which philosophy has been the ceaseless quest, the all embracing Father for Whom, through all the generations, the heart of man has cried out, after Whom in every age, in spite of darkness and of doubt, the hand of man has been stretched forth, if haply he might feel after Him and find Him. It is no light task which we take upon us, but the most stupendous of which the mind of man can conceive—one which calls for the harmonious action of every faculty, the consecration of every power. We know well that there is no royal road to the mastery of law or of medicine, of science or of art; and shall we expect less serious demands upon the man who would know God?

No doubt it is easy to exaggerate the importance of a purely academic training. Paul's warning to the Corinthians is always in place. "Not many wise after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called." We remember the words of Christ, "I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that 'Thou didst hide these things from the wise and understanding, and didst reveal them unto babes.'" The kingdom of God is for the childlike. But childlikeness is not laziness. Childhood is the time of interest, of activity; when every sense is open, and every faculty awake; when the thirst for knowledge is most acute and all-embracing, and school closes only when the tired head drops at last upon the pillow. To be like a child—it is to come to each new day with a sense of infinite possibilities, with an unflinching interest, a curiosity unsatisfied and insatiable; it is to break loose from the bonds of habit which our idleness or weariness or discouragement have forged for us, and to look up into the open heaven with an eye clear and fearless, eager to see and quick to receive whatever the Father may have to give. If we would know God we must bring this spirit with us to our quest.

Alertness of mind then is a condition of the highest religious life. When a man comes to the Seminary with his views about God ready made, and expects to carry these views with him unchanged, no matter what new light may come to him from the studies of the course, his loss is not simply intellectual; it is spiritual. When a man, perplexed by the variety of questions which confront him, and the multitude of points still unsettled, turns to his Professor of Systematic Theology for some formula, in which all these difficulties shall find their solution, and which he may carry with

him through life, as a substitute for the slow and painful discipline of thought, he turns his back on more than a better theology; it is his experience which he is impoverishing. To know God we must study the divine life which is all about us, with minds open to receive the new ideas which contact with life always brings. If a man shrink back from the labor and strain which this involves, he need not wonder if he find his spiritual life grow starved and thin.

Of selfishness, as an obstacle to the knowledge of God, I need say but a word. Here we find ourselves on ground that is all too familiar. "God is love, and he that abideth in love abideth in God, and God abideth in him." How can the man whose life is given to self-seeking know the Being whose very Nature it is to spend and to be spent for others. How can he even understand the terms in which the passion of God to save has written its sublime record across the book of human life. Atonement, cross, reconciliation, sacrifice, forgiveness—to him these are dead coals from which the fire has burnt itself out, and there is no spark in his own breast to kindle them again. They are puzzles of the intellect, interesting, it may be, just in proportion as they are baffling, but like all purely intellectual puzzles, incapable of solution when divorced from their original contact with life. To know God as Christ knew Him and as he wished his disciples to know Him, there is but one way. It is to walk the pathway which he has walked before us; to face as he faced them, in the wilderness, at Cæsarea Philippi, in the garden, the devils of pride, of ambition, of cowardice, of self-indulgence; and out of the victory, win the experience through which he gained his insight into the heart of God. Long ago Paul learned this lesson, and every man, from Paul's day to this, who has sought to speak some fresh true word about God, has had to learn it anew.

In the train of inertia and selfishness comes unbelief. And by this I do not mean the rejection of any specific doctrine about God, but the spirit which has lost faith in man's ability to know God at all, or at least to know him now, under the conditions of our present life. This spirit may show itself in many different forms; frankly, as in the case of the avowed agnostic, who stoutly maintains that any experimental knowledge of God is impossible in the nature of the case; or more warily, in the disguise of reverence for the past, and veneration for God's revelation once given. Such unbelief will grant you that there was a time when men could see

God, when he spoke to them as man to man, and their heart burned within them for the glory of the message. But this day, it tells us, has long passed. Revelation is over; the canon is closed. Here in our Bible we have the record of the message handed down to us by those who had this wonderful experience, that it may serve us in these days when there is no open vision as a substitute for the greater gift. To this modern agnosticism, to be religious means to hold fast to the doctrines and traditions of the past, to distrust present insight, however enticing it may seem, and being blind oneself, to cleave to those who tell us they have seen.

But how can we tell whether they have seen or not? This is the question which is being more and more forced upon us by the conditions of our modern life. The premises on which the apologist of a generation ago based his appeal no longer find unquestioning acceptance. New issues have arisen. Criticism, long supreme in other fields, now claims religion for its province. Whether we agree with them or not, the fact remains that an increasing number of scholars, many of them in Christian Seminaries, hold a view of the Bible which would have seemed revolutionary to our fathers. The hard and fast line drawn between this book and other books *seems* breaking down. What shall the man do who is brought face to face with such facts—what but inquire again into the foundations of his faith, to see whether of a truth its basis be purely external—a basis which as criticism has established so it may destroy; or whether its true ground does not lie deeper, in a contact with God, possible here and now, which assures the trustful soul of his presence, and gives the test by which it is possible to tell whether the claim of those who wrote our Bible be really true.

This is why it is so important that the Higher Criticism should be taught in our seminaries. Not because it makes so much difference whether a man learns the latest word of scholarship about the Biblical books. That is a comparatively small matter. Many a man has done and is doing valiant work for Christ who knows little or nothing of the date and authorship of Isaiah or of Daniel. No, the real reason is of another kind. It is because the critical processes which this method of study requires force upon the student at the outset of his ministry the ultimate question of faith. The multiplicity of points which science shows to be unsettled

leads the earnest soul to a more determined quest of the things which abide, and criticism, through the very uncertainties which lead many to shrink back from it in alarm, becomes a school for the cultivation of the spiritual life.

If we seek to put into a single word the message which modern study brings us, and which with ever greater insistence it is repeating with each new day, it is the need of a new vision of God. A new *vision* of God; not a new doctrine about God (the new theology, of which we hear so much, will come in its own time, when we are ready for it), but a new vision, a new contact with God in experience, a new sense of His presence here and now, which shall do for us in our new day and in our new world what the experience and insight of our fathers did for them in theirs. Of facts we have enough and to spare. It is interpreters who are needed—men who can see meanings and who are able to tell others what they have seen.

And if modern science shows us our need, it shows us also where help is to be found. For one thing, it gives us a larger idea of God, and with it a wider conception of spiritual experience. The theology of the past separated God and the world. It set the religious over against the secular, and the sacred against the profane. This had its good side. It made God real and definite. It marked out the path of His service with a precision from which one could not escape. To find God one must follow His appointed way, read His book, attend His house, turn aside from the distractions of the world to commune with Him in prayer. This method produced saints—men and women who did really commune with God, and who have left the record of their experiences written for our instruction in the literature of the devotional life. But it narrowed the range of spiritual experience. It left a large part of human life practically godless, and in its desire to lift God above the world, robbed Him of that which is His chief glory. We think of Christ's conception of the religious life—its breadth, its sympathy, its naturalness, its humanness; and we feel that there are phases of spiritual experience which he exemplified, not written in the Confessions of Augustine or the Imitation of Thomas. Here modern science comes to our help. With its strong sense of the unity of life, it enlarges our conception of God. It shows us that if God is anywhere he must be everywhere; in the present as in the past, in the secular as in the religious, in the workshop as in

the study. It translates spiritual experience from the prerogative of the few to the privilege of the many and gives us as our ideal the sanctification of the whole of life.

With this enlarged conception of God goes the new sense of brotherhood which is so distinguishing a feature of our day. Here is a great help to the knowledge of which we are in search. Social service is not in itself religious, but it is the best school for the cultivation of those qualities of character upon the possession of which a sound knowledge of God depends. Where the spirit of Christ is present, the insight of Christ cannot be permanently lacking.

And yet we must face the fact that many an earnest worker to-day is confronting the vast problems of our modern life without the God sense which is the joy of religion. When every nerve is strained to meet the pressing needs of men, to give them better homes and schools and laws, to right old wrongs, and pluck up by the roots the causes from which new wrongs spring, it is not easy to preserve the peace of mind from which spiritual insight springs. And yet without such insight what truly great work can be accomplished? How is it possible to harmonize these two sides of our nature; to preserve the consciousness of the divine in the midst of the stress and strain of modern social service? This is the deepest question of our time—a question often half realized, inarticulate.

Where shall we find its answer? Where but in the discovery of some man who has actually done the thing for which we long—who has carried into the midst of human life with its sorrows and its sins the same consciousness of the presence of God which is the joy of the mystic in his retreat. Show us the man in whom ethics and religion, sense for God and service of man are so one in a human life that you cannot tell where one ends and the other begins, and you will have met the need of our age at its deepest point.

Here modern scholarship brings us its most priceless gift. Among the helps to the cultivation of the spiritual life, none compares in importance with the re-discovery of Jesus. In Jesus we find one who has solved our problem. Man like ourselves in his limitations and temptations, feeling with an acuteness of sympathy never surpassed the needs and sufferings of humanity, he yet lived in continual consciousness of the presence of God. His re-

ligious insight was not a matter of rare intervals only, coming to him at moments of spiritual exaltation—on the mountain, in the desert. Into the commonest experiences of life, by the bedside of the sick, with the fishermen at their nets, at the wedding feast, he carried the sense of a presence to know Whom was light and life and peace. And his Gospel answered to his experience. We hear him speaking to men of a Father Whose love is all embracing, Who watches over the lilies and the birds, Who sends His rain on the just and the unjust, Who knows no privileged class to whom He confines His favors but is ready to impart Himself in gracious presence and redemptive love wherever human need cries out, and human penitence and trust receive.

At first men are staggered by the message. It seems too good to be true. But presently we see them putting it to the test. They, too, find God for themselves and walk through life in the joy and glory of His presence. They, too, become witnesses to the unseen Father, calling men to a like experience. So the fire of the spiritual life, kindled ever anew, burns ever more widely and brightly, as one after another comes within the circle of its influence and adds his fuel to its flame. As Christianity began as an experience, not as a dogma or a ritual, so it has continued ever since. Now, as in the days of Andrew and of Philip, it means the discovery of God in human life, through contact with the Man of men who had this consciousness supremely. Whatever else modern criticism may have taken away from us, this great fact it has made plain, and giving us this, it has put in our hands the most effective weapon against the attacks of unbelief.

For life is born of life. There is no other way. Difficulties that are simply of the mind may be removed by argument. But where it is a case of poverty of spirit logic can do little. Nor are the familiar practices of devotion in better case. When I have lost my God shall I find Him in prayer? Without God how can I pray? Prayer is a hunger of the soul which already in anticipation grasps the unseen. Faith is its essence. How then shall prayer avail against unbelief? For such a disease there is but one remedy; and that is contact with some one whose faith is strong. Let me meet a man in my godless world to whom God is the most real of all realities; who, facing the experiences which have quenched my faith, still keeps an open eye for things divine, and if there remain in me any capacity for spiritual vision at all, it

will be quickened into life. This is the philosophy of Bible reading and of church going. They are means by which those whose religious life is weak gain stimulus and refreshment by touching those whose religious life is strong. As the sense of beauty grows by feeding on the beautiful, and there is no school of art like contact with the artist, so it is in religion. The man who feels God most keenly and sees Him most widely is the man who can do most to reveal Him to others. That is why Jesus holds the central place he does in the religious history of the race.

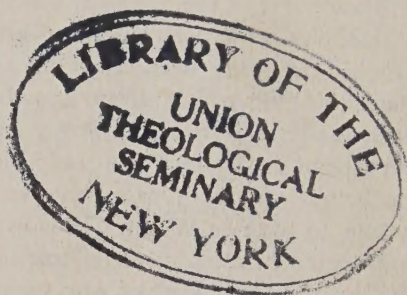
For it is God Whom men crave to know—now as in the days of the Psalmist. Of all the crowding wants and longings of our time, this hunger is the keenest. What men ask of the pulpit is not philosophy, gladly as they welcome the wide outlook which philosophic training gives. It is not science, highly as they value the clear thinking which exact knowledge makes possible. It is not even leadership in philanthropy and social reform, legitimate and important as these are in their place. It is some clear word born of experience concerning the God Who alone gives meaning and value to life; in Whom philosophy and science, philanthropy and statesmanship find at once their inspiration and their goal.

And so the last word of our twentieth century philosophy of religion is the old word of the first. Come to Jesus. Learn to know him that through him you may learn to know the God he knew. This is the high task of our Seminary life. For this our elaborate machinery exists. Philosophy and history, exegesis and criticism are so many helps to the understanding of Jesus. Let us study his life as modern science makes it real to us. Let us drink of the water by which his spirit was refreshed. Let us commune with the Father in Whom he put his trust. And then let us go out into the world, with all its varied needs and experiences, that we may put our knowledge to the proof. So shall we be fitted for our high vocation as preachers.

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