

CHRISTIANITY TODAY



||| A PRESBYTERIAN JOURNAL DEVOTED TO STATING, DEFENDING
AND FURTHERING THE GOSPEL IN THE MODERN WORLD |||

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Christianity and Immortality

FAITH in immortality seems to be on the wane. Otherwise it is difficult, if not impossible, to account for the increasing number of suicides. One can scarcely pick up a newspaper today without finding a report of persons—not infrequently persons of national or even international reputations—who have taken their own lives. Doubtless some of these suicides can be explained on the theory of temporary insanity and so on the ground of mental and moral irresponsibility; but as a whole it seems clear that they bear witness to a widespread disbelief in the continuance of life beyond the grave. On the assumption of a waning belief in immortality, there is nothing particularly strange about the growing number of suicides. When men believe that life is but a cry between two eternal silences, it is not surprising that they should judge that suicide offers a reasonable way of escape when the disadvantages of life appear to be hopelessly in excess of its advantages.

If the true explanation of the growing number of suicides is an increasing lack of faith in immortality, it would seem to follow that the only way to lower the number of suicides is a renewed faith in immortality on the part of men in general. We submit that this can be brought about in the twentieth century only as it was brought about in the first century, viz., by convincing men of the reality and the authenticity of that divine revelation in word and deed that is recorded in the Bible.

We would not be understood as

minimizing the value of the rational arguments for immortality, such as the historical and the teleological and the moral. We are far from supposing that Kant's criticisms emptied them of significance. At the best, however, we believe that they establish a strong presumption in favor of belief in immortality. If we are to believe not only in the probability but the certainty of immortality we must have evidence of immortality additional to that supplied by purely rational argumentation. Valid evidence of the kind required is found only in that revelation of life and immortality given us in the gospel. As a matter of fact it was not rational argumentation but historical evidence to the effect that CHRIST had risen from the dead and was the first fruits of them that are asleep that brought about that transformation in men's attitude toward immortality that marked the beginning

of the Christian era. Let mankind lose the conviction that CHRIST has been raised from the dead and that He spoke with authority concerning the life that is to come as well as the life that now is, and there is every reason to suppose that mankind will sink back into that spirit of hopelessness as regards a future life that characterized the ancient pagan world.

The reason why there can be no rational *demonstration* of immortality is often overlooked. It lies in the fact that immortality is an event that occurs, not a necessary truth; and that the appropriate evidence for establishing the occurrence of an event is personal experience or adequate testimony. This means that either we must wait until we die to discover whether we are immortal or some competent person or persons must offer trustworthy testimony as to the reality of life beyond the grave. For instance previous to 1492 many on the basis of rational considerations believed in the probability of the existence of a transatlantic continent but probability passed into certainty when Columbus and his men actually visited this transatlantic continent and bore trustworthy testimony to its existence as a matter of fact. So it is as regards the question whether we are immortal. Either we must wait until death to find out or we must be supplied with some adequate testimony as to the actuality of life beyond the grave.

A pound of testimony is worth more than a ton of rational argumentation when the problem of immortality is

IN THIS ISSUE

Editorial Comment	3
Why I Am a Conservative	5
F. N. McMillin	
Whom Say Ye That I Am?	6
L. Verduin	
Bithynia's Unknown Evangelists	9
A. Hogue	
Notes on Biblical Exposition	12
J. G. Machen	
Letters to the Editor	14
Books of Religious Significance	16
News of the Church	17

Books of Religious Significance

REFORMED DOGMATICS by Louis Berkhof, Professor of Dogmatic Theology at Calvin Seminary. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. Two Volumes. pp. 797 including Bibliography and Index. \$10.00.

IT is hardly too much to say that this is the most important work in systematic theology, from an American source, that has appeared in recent years. It seemed a pity to the writer that Dr. B. B. Warfield passed away without having left us a systematic theology, much as we value the collection of his selected writings that are now being issued by the Oxford University Press. Our regret over Dr. Warfield's failure to give us a systematic statement of his theological conclusions has been greatly lessened, however, by the appearance of these able and comprehensive volumes from the pen of Professor Berkhof. While Professor Berkhof is not a stranger to the writings of Dr. Warfield (to mention only modern theologians) it is the influence of the writings of the great Dutch theologians, Kuyper, Bavinck and Vos, that is most noticeable throughout these volumes. This is not to imply that Professor Berkhof has given us but a compilation of the conclusions of these great masters of reformed theology. Despite his modesty in laying claim to no special originality as a theologian, it is obvious that all had passed through the alembic of his own keen and constructive mind before he placed pen to paper. While these volumes are the outgrowth of the author's class-room and the schematic arrangement is intended primarily to meet the needs of theological students, yet they are admirably fitted to meet the needs of men in the active ministry. Greek and Hebrew type has been avoided. The result is a work that also meets the needs of those who have had no special theological training. The price is not large when it is considered that it would require a small library of ordinary books to cover the subjects treated in these volumes.

These volumes are correctly named. This is not a work in apologetics. Its conclusions are assumed. It also assumes rather than presents the conclusions of exegetical and historical theology. What it seeks to do is to set forth in a systematic way the doctrines of Christianity, as these are understood in Calvinistic circles. The views of divergent views are not overlooked, but their consideration is always incidental to the exposition of theology as understood in Reformed circles. Like all truly Reformed theologians Professor Berkhof is distinctly a Biblical not a speculative theologian. He draws his material from revelation, particularly from that supernatural revelation

which is recorded in Holy Scripture. His central aim is first to reflect in his own consciousness and then to present in systematic form the whole of that knowledge of God and divine things made known to us through special revelation as embodied in the Bible.

Professor Berkhof presents his material under six main heads: (1) The doctrine of God and the World; (2) The doctrine of man in relation to God; (3) The doctrine of the person and work of Christ; (4) The doctrine of the application of the work of redemption; (5) The doctrine of the Church and the means of grace; and (6) The doctrine of last things.

It would mean much for Christianity if works like this were more generally read. Dogmatic theology is discredited in many quarters in the interest of a practical piety without doctrinal content; and the result is Christians who waver in their testimony and who are distressingly inefficient. Let it not be forgotten that the only consistent despisers of dogmatic theology are those who deny the reality of supernatural revelation in word and deed as recorded in the Bible. If the Bible is true, dogmatic theology stands in no need of defense. Its necessity is a matter of course. This is what Francis Landey Patten had in mind when, with his intellectual powers at their height, he said: "Sooner or later I am sure the eyes of men will be opened and they will see—would to God they might see it now—the great battle of the twentieth century is in its final issue a struggle between a Dogmatic Christianity on the one hand and an out-and-out naturalistic philosophy on the other."

S. G. C.

THE WORD AND THE WORLD by Emil Brunner, Professor of Theology at the University of Zurich. Charles Scribner's Sons. pp. 127. \$1.75.

THIS is the second book in English dress by Dr. Brunner. "The Theology of Crisis" consisted of a series of lectures delivered in this country in exposition of Barthianism and was reviewed at some length in our issue of May, 1930. The book before us consists of five brief lectures delivered on invitation of the University of London in March, 1931. Dr. Brunner while differing from Karl Barth on some points is everywhere recognized as one of the ablest exponents of the theological movement that has achieved such headway, especially in Europe, under the name of the Dialectical Theology or Barthianism. That it is not without influence in Great Britain and America was indicated in our issue of November, 1931, in connection with our review of "The Significance of Karl Barth" by John

McConnachie, a Scotch minister, and "Karl Barth: Prophet of a New Christianity?" by William Pauck, professor of the Congregational theological seminary of Chicago. Dr. Brunner is a man of commanding ability whose writings cannot be ignored by any desirous of understanding the genius of the movement he essays to interpret and commend.

Dr. Brunner professes a two-fold object in these lectures: (1) to render the old truth of the Bible once more intelligible to thinking men of today and (2) to remove misunderstandings which confront the Dialectical Theology, not on the Continent merely, but in Great Britain and America.

This book by Dr. Brunner had not appeared when in our issue of November last we expressed the opinion that Barthianism is fatally defective at at least three points—in its one-sided emphasis on the transcendence of God, in its supposition that Christian faith is not built on historic facts, and in its contention that while the Word of God is in the Bible yet the Word of God is in no real sense to be identified with the words of the Bible. It happens that in this book Dr. Brunner deals with all these points.

He vigorously defends Barthianism against the charge of placing an exclusive emphasis on the transcendence of God, affirming that "much nonsense has been talked about the 'Barthian Theology' having perception only for the transcendence of God, not for His immanence." He also defends Barthianism against the charge of minimizing the significance of the historical element, of that which occurred in time in the person and work of Jesus Christ. At the beginning of his lecture on "The Word of Christ and History" he says: "It is not superfluous to utter today in theology the commonplace that Christian faith is faith in Jesus Christ—that belief which the Fourth Gospel formulates in its own fashion: the Word of God has become flesh in Jesus Christ. This assertion is exclusively Christian. . . . The entire New Testament in all its parts, where it speaks of Jesus the Christ, means by this name an event which is not only gradually but fundamentally above all other events, and one which essentially can happen but once."

The third charge, however (that having to do with the Bible), he not only admits but iterates and reiterates. He distinguishes sharply between the Word of God contained in the Bible and the Bible itself; and thus separates himself from those he calls the orthodox or fundamentalists. The following passage is typical and also indicates that he has much more sympathy for the fundamentalists than for the modernists: "The Son of God who came in the likeness of man in the form of a servant, also gave His Word in the form of a servant. That is why in the Bible we find so many errors and inaccuracies, so much that is no better than what man has said and

done in other places and in other times; the Bible is full of that frailty and fallibility which is characteristic of all that is human. But this earthen vessel was designed by God to become the receptacle of peculiar contents, the bearer of a history and a message which no other books contains. He who confuses the message with the material in which the message is written, is foolish. But he who, because of this earthen material, despises the message is much more foolish. The former, the orthodox, after all is concerned about the message, and for its sake he thinks the material to be holy, which is (so to speak) a piece of childish folly; but the other throws away the *pearls* because they are covered with dust" (p. 96). While we agree that the Bible cannot rightly claim exemption from historico-critical treatment we are far from supposing, as Brunner seems to do,

that its value as divine revelation is independent of the results of such criticisms. Here Dr. Vos is the better teacher: "Whether we like it or not, criticism can touch the essence of our religion, because religion has become incarnate, and for our sakes had to become incarnate and make itself vulnerable in historic forms. As the Son of God while on earth had to expose Himself to the unbelief and scorn of men, so the Word of the Gospel could not be what it is for us unless it were subject to the same humiliation." But while we think Dr. Brunner's view of the Bible fatally defective, we are grateful for his exaltation of revelation above reason as the one way whereby we can learn of God and His saving grace.

Dr. Brunner shares Karl Barth's estimate of apologetics. As a result it seems to us that even those important truths that Barth-

ianism emphasizes hang in the air, as it were, to be accepted by us, if accepted at all, as an act of sheer faith, not as by those who can give a reason for the faith that is in them.

There is much that is commendable about Barthianism, especially its attitude toward Modernism. The Barthians at least have their eyes open to the fact that Modernism is not Christianity but something diametrically opposed to Christianity. "Modern thinking," writes Brunner, "expresses a new interpretation of human existence and one which is as irreconcilably opposed to that found in the Bible and in Christian teaching as were the Baals against which the prophet Elijah fought to the God of Israel. For Christianity, the conflict with modern thinking is a fight for very existence."

S. G. C.

News of the Church

The Overtures

AT the present time it appears that none of the overtures sent down by the last General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. to the Presbyteries has much more than a remote possibility of adoption. The vote by presbyteries is as follows:

	Yes	No	No Action
A	44	26	—
B	16	55	1
C	45	23	1
D	36	29	4
E	46	21	1

Presbytery of Philadelphia Concurs in Overtures

THE Presbytery of Philadelphia, in its regular meeting held on April 4, voted overwhelmingly to concur in the overture of the Presbytery of Philadelphia-North, asking the General Assembly to take steps to abolish the General Council of the Assembly. The Presbytery also concurred in the Overture of the Presbytery of Cayuga relating to the proposed Union with the United Presbyterian Church requesting deliberation and caution, and with the overture of the Presbytery of Clarion asking the Assembly to protest against certain forms of cigarette advertising.

New Plan for Vacancy and Supply

THE Presbytery of Birmingham, in the Presbyterian Church in the U. S., has adopted a new plan for handling the difficult question of vacancy and supply. Believing that much trouble is bred by a tendency of

some churches to lose sight of "the ties that bind" in the Presbyterian system and to become unconsciously congregational in practice, the Presbytery has devised a plan that, it is hoped, will correct this tendency. Believing also that a double standard has grown up as between the requirements of the Presbytery in the matter of a candidate's qualifications for ordination, and the congregation's conception of ministerial qualifications, a "supplement" has been added to the act establishing the Bureau which emphasizes the fundamental qualifications of the minister as defined in the Confession of Faith and the Book of Church Order. The plan, which is entirely voluntary is as follows:

BUREAU OF VACANCY AND SUPPLY OF THE PRESBYTERY OF BIRMINGHAM

I. *Structure:* To the end that our churches may enjoy a more intimate and helpful relation to the Presbytery and to the church at large, and that they may develop a keener sense of corporate consciousness, we recommend that the Presbytery of Birmingham establish a Bureau of Vacancy and Supply after the following manner:

1. The Bureau shall consist of three members. The first group shall be elected for one, two, and three years. The regular election shall be by Presbytery at its stated Spring meeting.
2. The relationship of the Bureau to the several churches and ministers shall be merely advisory. Its function shall be in close cooperation with the Bureau of Vacancy and Supply of the General Assembly.
3. Immediately after a church has become vacant the Bureau shall nominate to the

Presbytery a Moderator for the Session of the church. The business of the Moderator elected by the Presbytery shall be to keep in close touch with the activities of the church and to preside over such meetings of the Session as expediency may dictate. The relationship which he shall sustain to the church will be that of representative of the Presbytery as Counsellor.

4. Immediately after a church has become vacant, the Bureau shall arrange with the officers of the church to send a minister to preach a sermon and to declare the pulpit vacant; to speak to the congregation of the relationships which maintain between ministers and churches, and between church and Presbytery; to advise with the officers of the church relative to a pastor, and to offer the full resources of the Bureau in securing a pastor. The supplement entitled, "PRESBYTERY'S COUNSEL TO CHURCHES" shall be read to the congregation, or used as a guide by the one charged with the service outlined above.
5. The minister who preaches the sermon and declares the pulpit vacant shall make a written report to the Bureau relative to his contacts with the vacant church, giving in detail such findings as are designed to be most helpful to the Bureau in its efforts to render intelligent and constructive service. The Moderator of the Session shall keep in close touch with the Bureau, making such suggestions as may be mutually helpful in the discharge of duties common to the church and the Bureau.
6. The Bureau shall be open to requests from churches, from officers of churches,