

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

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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