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The Old and the New in Theology

AN ADDRESS

By

Cleland Boyd McAfee, Ph.D., D.D.

*Cyrus H. McCormick Professor of Didactic and Polemic
Theology in McCormick Theological
Seminary, Chicago*



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THE OLD AND THE NEW IN THEOLOGY

In the year 1826, eighty-seven years ago, Albert Barnes, then in his power, delivered an address to the alumni of Hamilton College in which he gave a hopeful forecast for the intellectual life of America. He spoke of science and literature as having their largest opportunity here. Then he went forward to say: "And the most profound of all sciences, the science of theology, will probably be better understood here than among any people. Mind is free here to investigate it, and it will be investigated. The whole subject is to be examined and re-examined. What can be defended is to be retained. What has come to us from the schools, not from the Bible, is to be abandoned." This address was published in a pamphlet, of which a copy is in the New York Public Library. The sentences which I have quoted are there annotated in a strong hand, with this expression: "As if it (theology) were a mere human science and not a revelation from God! Is the author an infidel?" Plainly there was a reader at that time to whom the suggestion of a revision of theology was only infidelity.

In the preface to his edition of Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*, Dr. James Marsh wrote the sentence: "For myself, I am fully convinced

that we can have no right views of theology till we have right views of the human mind." That is, new light on psychology will change our views of theology. When good Dr. MacVicar came to publish a new edition, he made that sentence one of the reasons for writing a preface of his own, dropping Dr. Marsh's, for, said he, "This certainly is not the creed of the Church." He could not admit that theology depended for its accuracy on psychology, and further comment indicates that he cannot admit that it depends on any other science.

The same broad difference of opinion can be found in our own day. In his Lowell Lectures on the Problem of Christianity Professor Royce uses such words as these:¹ "No religion can survive unless it keeps in touch with men's conscious needs. In the future, men's needs will be subject to vastly complex and rapidly changing social motives. . . Christianity will always arouse new critical and philosophical inquiries; its creeds will probably change unceasingly; its present institutions may in time wholly pass away."

On the other hand, a book came to my desk this past summer whose preface begins with the sentences:—"The author is not a seeker after new truth. Why seek after new truth before we have mastered old truth, before we have appropriated and moulded our lives by the old truth?" It is difficult to feel that such divergent opinions are matters of words alone.

¹Vol. I. 393, 422f.

At any rate, such incidents bring into view the question which we have set for ourselves to-day: Can there be anything new in theology, if theology is based on a revelation, authoritative and final? Has not the last word been said, in the nature of the case, and is it not our part simply to say that word over again? Can we have anything in the nature of new truth at this late date? And is it not impossible for theology to admit dependent relation to any other science, such as psychology or biology?

As usual, there are three possibilities, one at either extreme, and one middle ground, each with its various shadings toward the others. First, one may deny the authority of the revelation, may insist that the Bible is like any other book, liable to the same errors, subject to the same objections, good as it may prove to be when we have critically finished with it, and likely to be surpassed by books that may yet be written. That solves the problem by destroying one of its terms. On that basis, or lack of basis, there is no reason why theology should not be new each year. There is no standard by which it may be measured.

At the other extreme, one may insist that any change in theology is impious and infidel, that religious truth, which is the matter of theology, is given us once for all and may not be enlarged or altered. If there should arise any apparent truth in any other realm which conflicts with what we have come to believe to be religious

truth, it must either be denied to be real truth or be so explained as to be consistent with the accepted truth of religion. The Bible certainly, as understood by the Church, and for many the early decisions of the Church as well, must be taken as final.

Each of these outside positions has its own line of defence, and no one wording could possibly be acceptable to all who hold the general position described. But each position runs finally into unwarrantable extremes. One gives a kind of mental liberty which is sheer license, with no foundation on which we can stand. The other brings us into mental bondage and shuts us out from any real following of the farther leadership of the Spirit of God.

Fortunately, most of us are eager to take the third or middle position. We want to accept an authoritative revelation, the Bible as wholly unique in the field of religion. We want to feel that God speaks to us in it as He speaks nowhere else, that in it we have final truth regarding God and man and their relation, final truth for the saving of the soul and of society. And we want to feel also, with the same force, that the Spirit whose presence inspires the Bible is still leading the Church, leading us to see new meanings in the Bible, to see new values in the truth, to see the relation of new truth in science and philosophy and human experience to old truth in religion, that He is constantly enriching our religious truth, giving us new material for the-

ology, challenging us to recognize the unity of the whole system of truth, and that therefore every new truth illumines all truth, that nothing can come to light anywhere which has not its bearing near or remote on our theological thinking. That is, we are eager to hold ourselves loyal to the old and cleareyed to the new, to hold firmly by the established faith of the Church and to keep open heart for everything in new knowledge which will enrich and confirm and correct that faith. This we are eager to do. But there are some who do not quite see how it can be done. The purpose of this hour is to point out how we may take this middle position, yielding to none in our loyalty to the great truths of the past, to the Scripture as the revealed source of theology, and yielding also to none in our loyalty to the living guiding Spirit of God; to point out how theology based on revelation may be made new, age by age or year by year.

And we are encouraged to this service by one of the greatest sayings of our Lord (Matt. 13: 52) in which He taught that "every scribe who hath been made a disciple to the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, who bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old." Surely men training for the ministry are such scribes. They are made disciples to the kingdom of heaven, and they ought to have somewhere rich treasuries out of which can be brought the best of the old and the best of the new. The days are reversed since the saying

of those words. The peril of the scribes of that day was that they might not be loyal to the new, holding slavishly to the old. The peril of our day is that we may not be so loyal to the old, but have an overweening fondness for the latest thing. But there is little to choose between those perils for men who seek to be householders for the kingdom of God and to bring out to His people the rich things He has in store for them.

I.

There are a few surface facts which should be clearly in mind as we go forward. We must always remember, for one thing, that not all that is proposed as new truth actually is true. There is a wide-spread habit of discovering things that are not there. Recently a system of new truth was proposed in Great Britain, which a shrewd observer met with the familiar saying that the new in it was not true and the true in it was not new. Thoughtful scientists do not propose their hypotheses as true but as tentative. The vast majority of them, announced and unannounced, ninety-nine in a hundred probably, prove erroneous in whole or in part. They are new, but they prove untrue. The history of theology has an abundance of similar results. The difference is that whereas in science most of the hypotheses are frankly handled as unproved, in theology they are more frequently declared to be the final truth at last discovered, and any one who says

them nay is an outcast and an infidel or that worst of all things, a conservative! Tolstoy was no theologian, but his experience was typical. When he was in the later twenties, and therefore wiser than he could ever hope again to be, he wrote to a friend: "A conversation about divinity and faith has suggested to me a great, stupendous idea to the realization of which I feel myself capable of devoting my life. This idea is the founding of a new religion, corresponding to the present state of man; the religion of Christianity, but purged of dogmas and mysticism, a practical religion, not promising future bliss but giving bliss on earth." It is a perpetually fascinating idea—until one tries it, as in one way and another a good many of us have done. Lay side all dogma, end your concern about the future, and make this a fine earth to live in. That is the new truth. In the old scheme there has been too much about heaven and hell and not enough about New York and Chicago, though the order is not suggestive. There are men who make a heroic effort to adjust their theology to this new idea or new accent. But there is a further incident in the life of Tolstoy which illustrates sadly how it often works. He had gone to visit Soutaef, an ex-tombstone maker, who had renounced the world, with whom he had a joyous conference. At the close of the talk Soutaef harnessed a horse to take Tolstoy home. On the way they became so interested in discussing the kingdom of God and its coming that they forgot the horse,

the cart was upset and they were spilled into a ravine. Yet Tolstoy was even then rebelling against so much accent on the future and calling for more careful regard for the present. And of all critics of Christian dogmatism there is none so dogmatic! The new proposal will not work; it is a truth which is not true so far as it is new and not new so far as it is true. There are more like it, and it is not incumbent on a religious thinker to hasten to adjust himself to just everything that somebody may propose as true. Theology has suffered enough in the past to justify its having become a fairly conservative science. But our concern is with what has proved itself true which may need to be fitted into our theological thinking. We are to find place for that, with no tremor or fear.

Farther, it is notably frequent that one has no sooner announced a "new" truth than a careful reading of history discovers it already lurking somewhere. He has brought it into a new connection, given it a new basis, and it is new only in that sense. Once it was only a guess; he has made it an assurance. One of the corollaries of the Copernican system was that the earth and the heavenly bodies are spherical and not flat. The early Greeks were not Copernicans, but they held that same view of the world and the sun and all the heavenly bodies they could see, only they held it on purely *a priori* grounds. These bodies are heavenly bodies and therefore perfect; but the most perfect figure is the sphere; there-

fore they are spherical. It is an interesting instance of a true conclusion based on false premises. As an established assurance, the sphericity of the heavenly bodies was, therefore, new truth, though as a guess based on mistaken premises it was very old.

I need hardly wait to remind you how many of the truths of our Christian faith find a similar crude analogy in other and earlier faiths. Some idea of incarnation, some idea of pluricity in the Godhead combined with unity, some idea of atonement based on divine suffering,—such ideas are not uncommon. Yet it remains that the Christian ideas of incarnation, of the Trinity and the atonement are essentially new ideas. The point I am specially making is that even in the Christian range of truth, there are many apparently new proposals which are already in the history of the faith, each waiting the new emphasis or the new basis that can be given it in a new day. Regarding such new truth, there ought to be no concern. It is only apparently new.

Then, there is much more room for new verbal statement than most of us realize, statement that will bring to view different aspects of our theological beliefs. Living language is always fluid. New terms come into use and many old ones either get new meanings or pass out of use altogether. In the realm of science that has been notably true. Since 1858, when *The Origin of Species* was published, a whole new vocabulary has come into existence in a field which theology is bound to

consider. It is the bane of all *systems*, whether of theology or of any thing else, that they become set to certain phrases which they continue to use in their own sense while in common matters the phrases have another meaning. The outstanding case in theology is the difficulty we find in making plain the sense in which we use the word Person as applied, not to the Godhead, where there is little difficulty, but to the three Persons of the Godhead. Later psychology, which most people understand better than the earlier psychology, defines the term person in such sense of independence as to make its use in the earlier sense inapt. The difficulty is not so much in the idea of the Person of the Trinity, as in the use of the word in an old sense in a new day. It is incidental to the fluidity of the living language. And it is partly the difficulty which theology has in stating itself in terms of the day which leads to the charge that it differs from other sciences in not being vital and modern. Not a few of the terms most familiar in theology have passed out of use in common speech and when they are used, there is a sense of the archaic and unreal. Such re-statement often makes an old teaching seem new, when it is really only a very old truth dressed for to-day's street.

We come in sight of another element of newness when we add that there is room for new arrangement of doctrines and re-statement of them because of new accents which the Spirit leads the Church to make. Doctrines are so interwoven,

that one of them cannot have new light thrown upon it without changing the color of the others. If they form a real system, then changing the place of any one of them will alter the place of any other. Take one instance. The doctrine of the immanence, the immediate nearness of God, is not a new one in the history of the Church, but the obvious danger of pantheism, of identifying God with the world in the very act of making Him near to it, made any strong accent on it seem unwise in the earlier day. The accent fell instead on the equally true doctrine of His transcendence. Now it is very plain that our current doctrine of the mediation if Christ is framed on the basis of the transcendence rather than the immanence of God. It implies the remoteness of God from the world, not His nearness to it. So Christ is easily thought of as a third party who comes in between the remote God in the heaven and man here in the earth, missing the fact with which we are familiar, that Christ is God himself coming into human life, so that in Him God and man meet. Now, while the danger of pantheism is not past, the Spirit seems plainly to have led the Church to see anew the glory of the truth of the immanence of God. Browning makes Pippa say: "God's in His heaven; all's right with the world." But it is because God is in His earth, that all is right with the world. And because He is here, the mediation of Christ is a richer, fuller, nearer fact than we have realized. Our new wording of it must

be influenced by the new accent. Years ago one of our greatest American preachers felt this coming. He said: "It seems to me as if the Christian world to-day was entering on a movement, nay, had already entered upon and gone far in a movement which is certainly to be no less profound and full of meaning than the great Protestant Reformation of three centuries ago. The final meaning really is the nearness of the soul of God to the soul of man, and of the soul of man to God. It is the meaning of the Incarnation."¹

Another illustration is the doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible. What has sometimes been called the dictation theory, or less properly the verbal inspiration theory, of Scripture is framed in view of the transcendence of God. He is not working within men, but upon them. He gives them not messages but words. And the theory is not false, but it is inadequate. When one becomes sure of the immanence of God, it becomes necessary to re-word it. The Spirit is thought of as working within men. They retain their powers, their peculiarities. They have messages which burn in their breasts and they give us not a mechanical but a dynamic book.

You will know without my telling you that this new accent carries some men away from their moorings, not simply into pantheism, but into a kind of naturalism, which explains away all the supernatural by declaring that everything

¹Allen, Phillips Brooks, II. 502.

is equally supernatural. The ill-fated New Theology of Rev. R. J. Campbell, of London, declared itself to be simply an effort to articulate the fundamentals of the Christian faith in terms of the immanence of God.¹ If it had been only that, or if its articulation had not been so violently wrought out, it might have rendered more valuable service.

In addition to the changes which are brought about by the new accent on immanence, there are many others suggested by the new social outlook of the day. I need not illustrate these, but any one who is sensitive to present currents will realize how many there are.

This rearrangement of doctrines is caused not only by new accents, but sometimes by the change of religious needs which the age brings. These changes never go to the bottom of humanity, for there the needs are ever the same. The fundamental wants of the human heart are the same everywhere and all the time. But it has been rightly pointed out that among the facts with which religion must reckon in our times is that to-day there are occurring greater changes in men's conscious spiritual needs than have ever before been known. "In consequence men's whole spiritual outlook will probably soon become different from any outlook that men have ever before experienced." Many of us deplore these changes; we may even deplore them so much that we will doubt their reality. But it is

¹New Theology, 3ff.

as well frankly to face and realize them. Religions have died in the past because they could not supply the increased spiritual needs of mankind. They could not state their truth intelligibly to men who were doing higher thinking; they could not rise to the heights to which men were climbing. For example, Christianity comes into Africa and finds fetishism and rank paganism. It lays hold on men and they rise under its guidance. New desires are aroused; men become conscious of new spiritual needs. And what happens to paganism and fetishism? They are simply left behind; they had nothing for the new condition. The demands of the new day were too much for them; whatever truth they had could not be worded intelligibly for the new thinking of the new day. On the other hand, when Buddhism entered Japan, it met new conditions and was slowly but surely transformed. Some think the change was for the better, some think it was for the worse, but no one doubts that it occurred. The change of environment led to a change of form and even of substance. The demands of the new day and the new time had to be met in some way. No faith can be indifferent to its immediate environment, however masterful it may be in the midst of it.

Now it is our conviction that no such change in substance has ever occurred in our Christian faith, either in the first age or in any later time. It has had nearly two thousand years of experience and it has had nearly every possible kind of

men to deal with. It has started with them when they were low but they have not outgrown it when they have become high. It has awakened new spiritual desires, has caused new spiritual needs to come into consciousness, but it has been able to supply those needs and gratify those desires. It has done this, however, by perpetual return to its fountains and by showing new and fuller meanings in its old truths, not by mere reiteration of those truths in old forms as though the old forms had in themselves some saving merit. The fundamental needs are the same the world around and the ages through. But places and times have their collateral needs. The best proof of the divineness of the Christian faith is its ready adaptation to those needs, its fitness to be voiced in such ways as shall make it seem suitable to all men, while yet it remains palpably the same.¹

Here then are four simple facts which bear on our thought: All that is proposed as new truth is not necessarily true; all that is proposed as new truth is not necessarily new; there may be much new statement because of the changes that occur in a living language; there is need for new arrangement because of the new accents of thinking which changed times bring, and because of new spiritual needs that come into consciousness with new conditions. These considerations bring us to the heart of our subject.

¹Dinsmore, *Atonement in Literature and Life*, 24.

II.

What, now, are new truths? In what sense do we use the word when we call a thing or a truth new? There are three such senses in common use. First, a thing may be new to personal experience. The alphabet is new to a child; St. Peter's is new to a traveler in his first visit. In this use of the word, it means new to the individual, though it is old to the race. Secondly, a thing may be new to all human experience. The X-ray is a new human discovery, but it has been in nature all the while. The motive power of electricity is new to us, but old to nature. As Bacon said long ago, "We may well hope that many excellent and useful matters are yet treasured up in the bosom of nature bearing no relation or analogy to our actual discoveries, but out of the common track of our imagination and still undiscovered; and which will doubtless be brought to light in the course of the lapse of years, as the others have been before them."¹ In this sense of the word it means new to the race, though old in itself. Thirdly, a thing may be new in itself; it has never before been experienced because it never before existed. Burbank's spineless cactus and thornless roses are new in that they never existed until he produced them. They are the result of a new combination of old forces which have never worked in this way be-

¹Novum Organum, i. 109.

fore. The forces of life and growth are old, but they have never before produced this result. Of course in this sense every individual is new. There has been none like him before, because he is himself and not another. In this sense of the word, it means new to the race and the world, though combining old forces.

1. In all these three senses, there are new truths in theology, there have been in the past, there is every reason to suppose there will be in the future. It is easy to see in the first sense, how a truth can be new to the individual. There come to the student no more delicious moments than those in which he says: "I never saw that before; now I see it." All his life he has heard men talk of the cross of Christ, of the atonement; it has meant little to him; one day he sees it all and it breaks him down with wonder; it is all so new, so great, so splendid, it becomes so plainly part of a great universe of God's plan and love. He wonders if it has looked like that to others before him, and he finds they have been seeing it so and coveting the same vision for him. It is new only to him; in itself it is old as Christ Himself. You remember the pathetic story of Heinrich Heine, and his final return to his Christian faith. In his testimony to the spiritual change which came over him, turning him from scepticism and scoffing to trust, he wrote: "Neither vision nor ecstasy, neither voice from heaven nor bodeful dream, has pointed the way of salvation to me; I owe my enlightenment quite

simply to the reading of a book. Of a book, you say? Yes, and it is an old and homely book, plain and natural as nature herself, a work-a-day and unpretentious looking book, and this book is sometimes called quite simply The Book, The Bible. Rightly it is also called Holy Writ. He who has lost his God may find Him again in this volume and he who has never known Him will there be met by the breath of the Divine Word."¹ And that came to Heine as a new discovery, but there were washerwomen in France and Germany who had known it all before he was born. New to him, it was old to the race. You may recall the letter which Max Muller wrote in his later years: "How shall I describe to you what I found in the New Testament? I had not read it in many years, and was prejudiced against it before I took it in hand. The light which struck Paul with blindness on his way to Damascus was not more strange than that which fell on me when I suddenly discovered the fulfillment of all hopes, the highest perfection of all philosophy, the key to all the seeming contradictions of the physical and moral world. The whole world seemed to me to be ordered for the sole purpose of furthering the religion of the Redeemer, and if this religion is not divine, I understand nothing at all. In all my studies of the ancient times, I have always felt the want of something and it was not until I knew our Lord that all was clear to me. With Him there is nothing I am unable

¹Quoted, Warschauer, *What is the Bible?* 11.

to solve. And yet there are some people who push the New Testament aside as if it had no message for them!" All this seemed new to Max Muller, but it had been old to thousands of people for centuries.

In the life of Phillips Brooks, one of the first three or four preachers this country has produced, there are three stages of religious thinking. The first was that of his childhood, when he accepted the truths given him. His papers in the Latin School show a natural boy's concern for those truths. The second stage came, in which they lost their power, sometimes they were denied, sometimes simply left one side as unimportant. His Harvard years reveal practically no interest in religion. Still later, came the third and final, though growing stage, when he recovered all the old truths, but with new faces, with new meanings—personal to himself, but plainly allied in his thought to the experience of the race. Though they had come as new to him in his more thoughtful young manhood, he discovered that they were old to the race. At the close of his first sermon come the revealing sentences; "I believe in these things because they have helped my race. I look to them as I look to the sun, with a faith which all these centuries of sunlight forbid me to disown. I hear them from the Bible claiming my allegiance as from nature I hear all truth demanding that I should give rea-

¹Quoted by Dr. Horton, Edinburgh Conference Report, X. 338.

son room to grow to love and faith." I cannot mistake in thinking that there are young men here who will have a similar experience. I covet for them those delicious moments of first vision, when they are stricken with wonder at a new truth, only to find that it is an old truth into whose range they have at last come.

And, after all, here lies the first and most pressing difficulty in finding place for new religious truth in one's theology. The stubborn fact is not some general, corporate system; it is one's own theology which finds it hard to accept a new view. One of the easiest errors is to measure the newness of ideas by one's own knowledge. I never saw it that way, I never thought of it that way—hence that is a new way, a revolutionary way, an heretical way. It is often surprising to a teacher to find that the most familiar teachings are so new to some of his students that they count them highly suspicious. A young man once objected to a statement of a theological preceptor, declaring it new-fangled and heretical. "Ah, yes, perhaps so," said the instructor, "but it is a quotation from Augustine!" Now, of course, Augustine may be heretical, but what he said can hardly be counted at this late date exactly new-fangled. The young man had only failed to realize that a good many things might be new in his personal experience which are very familiar to others with larger and wider experience. Cromwell met a protesting body of divines once with the saying: "I beseech you by

the mercies of Christ, consider it possible that you may be mistaken!" One inclines to urge upon one's self and all other students to consider that they may be limited in their range, and that others may be getting wider views and seeing truths which are not new except in personal experience.

2. The second sense of the word "new" appears in theology also, where are truths new to the whole race and yet old as eternity themselves. Once all the great Christian truths were new to the race. Some of them suddenly, most of them slowly, swam into the field of human thought, and men found they were only thinking God's long thoughts after Him. The apostles came slowly to realize the person and work of our Lord; they saw Him at last in His true light as the atoning Son of God; and it was all new, marvellously new; no one had ever heard such news; men the most thoughtful, men the wisest could not credit it, so did it break out like a new creation before them. But the fact was old as eternity. Calvary only put into the records of time the undated fact of eternity. He was a Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. "He was foreknown indeed before the foundation of the world, but was manifested at the end of the times for our sakes, who through Him are believers in God." (1 Peter 1:20, 21.) And very early they saw how that newness was only new to the race. In the Shepherd of Hermas, the ninth similitude tells the story.

There comes to view an immense and ancient rock in which is a gate newly cut. What are the rock and the tower? asks Hermas of his guide. "This rock and this gate," he answered, "are the Son of God." "But how?" I said, "the rock is old, but the gate is new." "Listen," he said, "and understand. The Son of God is older than all His creatures; so that He was a counsellor with the Father in His work of creation; therefore He is old." "And why is the gate new?" "Because He became manifest in the last days of the dispensation: for this reason the gate was made new, so that those who are to be saved might enter into the Kingdom of God through it." Ancient rock—modern gate—that says it for us all. A fact and a doctrine new to us, new to the whole race, but old in itself, and men of that day had to make room for it in their thinking. So, also, the doctrine of the Trinity is almost datable. When it finally took shape, it was new and fresh in human thought, but as a fact it is old as God himself. The newness is in our human understanding. And that understanding must be changing and growing as we go on under the guidance of the living Spirit.

It is here that the largest element of newness enters into theology—in the interpretation and explanation of eternal facts. In this field there will always be room for new truth. The facts remain unaltered, but the methods of dealing with them or of explaining them differ in many ways, and new facts which are collateral may

swing into view. The facts lie in history and in Christian experience—that experience sometimes personal, sometimes communal. Taking these facts from all sources, the theologian tries to form a working theory of them, a theory which satisfies him rationally and will make them available for life, his own life and other men's lives. As time goes on, the facts gain new aspects; they are seen from a new angle, new sets of experiences come, a wider range of experiences is taken in. There will inevitably be a change in the working theories of them. Such theories are not final; they approach correctness only as they explain the facts and make them available for life. A new theory or a modified theory does not imply changed facts.

Moreover, a student might be much dissatisfied with a given doctrine while he would be perfectly clear about the ultimate facts. Illustrate this with the doctrine of the atonement, now under sharpest discussion. The fact is perfectly apparent in history and in personal experience, that men who have had a conscious sense of alienation from God because of sin have received a quiet and peaceful sense of harmony with God through faith in Christ. Separated once, they have come to be at one with God. That looks to be a simple fact. Like any important fact, it is actually very complex. It permits wide discussion as to its explanation. Accepting it as a fact, one may still ask where the important stress should be laid. Is there any one particular ele-

ment in the life and death of Christ which is the atoning element? One may ask how any act of Christ could bring about such a reconciliation. One may ask what is the nature of the change as it affects God; what was His attitude toward men before and after the atoning act of Christ? One may ask what happens in the lives of men by reason of that act, and how the work of Christ is connected with that change? There are a dozen great, divisive questions that may arise with perfect propriety, forced by the presence of facts, about which no debate arises. None of the questions affects the central fact of experienced and recorded atonement with God, the fact of pardoned sin and peace with God through Christ. But all great facts have a clear center, like the center of consciousness in our modern psychology, and then ray off into less obvious relations which are not so clear. So you have room for theories of the atonement, which are sure to be framed into doctrines more or less rigid. They constitute your working theory of the fact of the atonement, and they are subject to change as the new and subsidiary phases of the great central fact come more and more into light. Do not mistake that. Of course, the fact is the chiefly important thing, but the theory is of tremendous importance also. It is that by which and with which one works. Defect in it will soon or late appear in defective working. Moreover, some explanation of any fact is as sure and final as the fact itself. All others but that one are defective

at least if they are not positively mistaken. All theories of the atonement cannot be the correct theory, though each of them may contain some aspect of the truth which the final theory must include. As study goes on and men think more and more broadly about it, it is certain that the explanation of the fact will change. New elements will enter into it. The fact has not changed and will not change, but its relation to a great field of other facts, its setting in the whole scheme of experience will necessarily change.

3. Here appears also the third meaning of the word new as applied to theology—in the new combinations of the old forces of God's revelation and leadership. We are seeing them in such new relations, that new phases of truth are often appearing. If we can use the word without a feeling of affection, we can say that we now are seeing our Christian truths in their cosmic relations. Joseph Jacobs has recently written, "There are those who consider that the fundamentals of Judaism are identical with the most prominent aspects of modern thinking. Its two main dogmas, the Divine Unity and the Messianic Hope, only express in historic form the fundamental scientific conception of the Unity of Energy and the essentially modern notion of Progress."¹ That idea sacrifices the personal phases of both the great Judaic doctrines named, and we do not accept it, but the point made is pertinent to

¹Ruppin, *The Jews of To-day*, Introduction, xix.

Christian theology. We are bound to pass from the conception of Christian truth as an isolated section of truth, which may be considered by itself, to the larger realization that our Christian faith is a statement for religion of the very heart of the universe. One of our current writers says that to a wise teacher, "grammar and geography are spliced to the core of the universe." That is only a graphic way of putting this great truth. We are dealing with cosmic facts. Atonement is an unspeakably greater thing than most of us think. The incarnation of God in Christ is not simply an event in Palestine at such and such a date—not simply that, though of course it is that, but it is the coming of God lovingly and savingly into the race which He made in His own likeness and means to redeem into that likeness. The incarnation is not an illogical irruption of God upon humanity, but a dynamic assertion of divine concern for humanity. So with all our great Christian truths; they are truths of the universe. They must be read in new and larger terms, terms which take up into themselves all that the old terms meant and vastly more. New combinations of the old forces are being made, and new truths are coming into knowledge. In his address this summer before the International Medical Congress in London, Professor Cushing, of Harvard, said amid much applause, "The kaleidoscope of medicine is turning, and new patterns come from the original forms." The figure is acceptable for theology.

There are new patterns, as the kaleidoscope of the years turns under the hand of the Spirit.

III.

There remains a very natural question: When there comes to one a new truth, new in any of these three senses, what is its relation to the belief held already? It may take any one of four relations. First, it may be new and contradictory. The old may prove not to have been true after all and it disappears in the light of the new. When the new truth of the Copernican theory came, the Ptolemaic theory had to be given up; it proved not to be true. That has happened in theology. When the Christian faith enters China, it finds a theology already there. Part of that theology it directly contradicts, and the two cannot be held together. There come similar results in theology when the new values of truth appear. Perhaps the most notable instance is the effect on our idea of God that has come from a clearer sense of Jesus' teaching about Him. There has been lost out of our idea of God a certain sense of vindictiveness, which was not always conscious, but which seems to have been very real. The famous sermon of Jonathan Edwards, our greatest American product in pure philosophical thinking, on Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God, is not thoroughly typical of the man, though it is almost all that some men of this day seem to have read of him,

but in it occurs the figure which represents the sinner in the hands of God as "a spider or some loathsome insect," held over the open fire. The holder loathes it as it deserves and is sure to cast it into the flames; only His own will prevents, and that will soon require its dropping and destruction. Now, while that is not typical of Edwards' idea of God, as numberless passages from his writings will show, yet it is a figure which could not come to one's mind if there were not in one's thought of God an element of the vindictive. If one were wholly committed to the Fatherly Spirit whom Jesus reveals, one would not think of that figure at all. Fuller understanding of the teaching of Jesus has taken that idea out, contradicted it, we may say. With it has gone for some, but need not go for any of us, the moral firmness which is important in our conception of God. The God of Jesus' revelation is not simply good-natured. He is morally good, and in all morally good character there is what George Matheson called the dark line, which insures the steady and consistent opposition of the character to wilful evil. But there is no room in our conception of God for any sense of vindictiveness. The new truth which Jesus taught about God has contradicted that.

Then, a truth may be new and corrective. In the light of it, some rearrangement of the old becomes necessary. There are ideas, as some one has said which "cannot be added to the former stock as one more shot is dropped in a bag.

They come rather as fresh elements in a chemical compound that compel readjustment of the whole.'¹ After the death of Cromwell, there followed several centuries of misunderstanding and underestimate, until Carlyle's studies of his correspondence were published, when much that was new to the people of his own day was brought to light. The result was a greatly changed conception of Cromwell; old estimates were altered; misunderstandings were corrected. That same result comes in theology when under new light the terms of an old problem are restated. We are now in a virtually new period of Christology, when the whole matter of the Person of our Lord is being reviewed. Something like the well-known kenotic theory has long been known in the Church, to be sure, though its present prevailing form has several new elements, but the explanation of His complex nature on the basis of the sub-conscious self, which Dr. Sanday has attempted, has not been possible at an earlier point in Christian history, because it is a very recent discovery in psychology that any such fact exists. Now, if either the modern kenotic or the sub-conscious theory of the Person of Christ should prove to be most satisfactory, the result will be a correction of some of our ideas in theology. They will not be overthrown; they will be simply restated to align them with the newer knowledge to which

¹Fosdick, *The Manhood of the Master*, 102.

we have been led by the Spirit. It will be an instance of truth that is new and corrective.

Then again, truth can be new and confirmative. Sometimes, that confirmation is illustrative. Much of our new missionary knowledge confirms the first chapter of the Romans with its teaching of the vileness of the human heart. Some of it confirms the truth that God has made all men of one blood. All of it confirms the truth that God has nowhere left Himself without witness. The new light of history confirms the faith of a purpose of God which is being slowly and surely wrought out. Under this head we put all new truth in philosophy and science that shows us how our Christian faith reaches into the wider realms of life. The theory of the atonement which Charles Allen Dinsmore and Professor Royce have recently been working out in such fullness will not meet all the demands of the Christian faith in the atonement, but it confirms its broad features. It shows how far from unnatural the idea of atonement, even vicarious atonement, is. It gives any man who wants to preach it, a sense of reassurance that the leadership of the Spirit in other fields is bringing the world to see other phases of the truth which he preaches. So the new truth confirms the old.

Once more, truth may be new and contributory or supplementary. It leaves the old truth as it was and augments it. The old proves to have been merely incomplete. You recall the case of

in the learned about Holy Ghost

Apollos, recorded in the eighteenth chapter of the Acts. He was an eloquent man, of the philosophical type, from Alexandria, mighty in the Scriptures. He had been taught by word of mouth in the way of the Lord; that is, he was not an idle dreamer, who had thought the thing out for himself with all the vagaries that are so apt to go along with that method; he was a warm-hearted preacher, and he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus. He came to Ephesus and began to preach with boldness in the synagogue. So far as he went, he was right; but he knew only the baptism of John. There was a new field which he had not even entered. It would conflict with nothing that he was now teaching, but it would contribute immense new riches to that teaching. So Priscilla and Aquila took him in charge, not to rebuke him and not to correct him, but to instruct him in the new truth which he had not yet learned. They expounded to him the way of God more accurately, that is, more completely, and the result was that he became by so much a mightier preacher of the things concerning Jesus. Certainly in the life of the minister of the Gospel such advances are constantly coming. New truth is coming to him, truth which broadens his horizon, which enlarges his range. It leaves him all his old truth, but it adds to his store. He comes before his people with a face that shines with the joy of a new and nearer insight into the meanings of God; he brings out of his treasure, replenished by the

loving, guiding Spirit of God, new things as well as old.

Any of these four relations the new truth may take to the old—it may be new and contradictory; in its presence the old is shown not to have been true after all. It may be new and corrective; in its presence doubtful elements of the old are set aside. It may be new and confirmative; in its presence the old becomes only more glorious. It may be new and contributory; in its presence the old is enriched and enlarged.

IV.

You must have felt already that what we mean by new truth is really new discoveries—not new creations, not new revelations in the ordinary meaning of that word. We make no truth, not by martyrdom in its behalf nor by vote of church or council nor by history. Nor can we maintain as true what is false, though again we die for it. But by the good grace of God we can discover truth; we can follow the guidance of His living Spirit into the new fields of knowledge. And when we have discovered new truth, we find in it the taste and flavor of rare wines which God has kept for us. As His feast goes on, Cana is repeated, and He brings out the best wines at the last. The truth is old as His own purposes; He has revealed it in terms which challenge our study and thought. More light is always breaking from His word. Dr. Bigg closes his lectures

on the Christian Platonists of Alexandria with a general estimate of the merits of Clement and Origen and the other mighty men of that period. He remarks that our first thought is how different they were from us and how inferior. But "a second and finer thought teaches us better. They were as we are. We have drifted away from them and experience has taught us many things. But our horizon is no wider and our light is no fuller. We know no more than they. The only way in which we can hope to surpass them is by the renunciation of vain endeavors and the concentration of all our efforts on the ideal of duty."¹ If we really believed that, it would be hard to think of the presence of a living, guiding Spirit of God. We may not know "more than they," but we ought to know more. We ought to have a wider horizon than the third century in this century. If we had not in theology, it would be the only realm of human life and thought of which it would be true.

I began this address with a quotation from Albert Barnes, which I did not complete. If his critic read farther, it seems strange that he should have made his sarcastic comment. The speaker went on to say: "I do not mean that the system as it fell from the lips of the Divine Author and as it stands in the Bible is susceptible of improvement. Nor are the sciences of botany and astronomy as they are presented by the Creator in the heavens and in the flowers of

¹Bigg, *Christian Platonists Alexandria*, p. 302.

the valley susceptible of advancement." But the ancient system of astronomical science and of botany may well be improved with fuller knowledge. "The truths of the Bible stood forth when first given to men, not to be amended or improved. But there have been erroneous views of these truths. They have been misunderstood or attached to false systems of philosophy and these are to be exploded." He continued by declaring that a better psychology and a new field in natural science would open to us. "Every advance which is made in science supposes a corresponding advance in theology and is in fact a new development which is to throw light on some obscure part of revelation. Infidelity will endeavor to take advantage of the new developments of knowledge and to render them tributary to its cause. And infidelity is to be met on its chosen ground and the contest fought there." I quoted Professor Royce, but again I did not complete the quotation: "The needs of the worshippers determine in the long run the historical fate of religions. It is just, however, to add that worshippers need an everlasting Gospel and that if such a gospel were to be revealed to man it would not only satisfy human needs, but also contain absolute religious truth."¹ In the revelation of God in Christ we believe there is such an everlasting Gospel and because it is everlasting, its meaning for us can never be exhausted. Dr. Royce himself gives countenance

¹Problem of Christianity, I. 386, 387, 422-425.

to such a belief. On a later page he says: "In the new human life of the future ages, love and loyalty will not lose but grow in human value, so long as men remain alive...The Christian virtues, then, will flourish in the civilization of the future, if indeed that civilization itself flourishes...Whatever becomes of the present creeds and the present institutions, the man of the future, looking out over the wide vista of the ages, will know how near he is, despite all time and change, to the spirit of Christianity." And when Dr. Gladden, with many a hard word for old views, yet tries to word what he calls Present-Day Theology, which others call New Theology, he says, "There is nothing new about it, except the discovery of it. It is all in the Scripture." If that be so, we are on safe ground, for what we call new will prove to be only a discovery of the truth infolded in the revelation of God.

And that brings me to what may be the closing word. We speak of the Christian faith as final. But what makes it so? This: the Christian faith is final because Christ cannot be surpassed. If He is, as we devoutly yet intelligently believe He is, the incarnation of God Himself, there can be no farther word of revelation. But if He is the incarnation of God Himself, then it is presumption and arrogance to claim to know all the truth that lies in Him. New lights are constantly shining from Him, new aspects of His life and nature are coming into view. He is growing no greater, but we are growing wiser about Him.

Nothing reveals His marvellous richness more plainly than the continuous discussions in Christology. Once it was easy enough to say that He was two natures in one Person. Now both the terms are troublesome. We want to say what the Fathers meant, but the words are confused for us. Neither Nature nor Person says just what we want to say. He still stands a fascinating mystery, larger than any word yet said about Him, larger than any creed yet formulated, worthy of all the books written about Him, no one of which is worthy of Him. All this He is, yet plain enough for the child to know Him. He is suited to be the revelation of the Eternal Father to all His children, the simplest and the wisest. When, therefore, it is said that revelation is closed, it is meant only that in Christ it has come to a climax which cannot be surpassed. God has given us Himself; our task now is to understand Him. We need no more revelation when once we have seen the incarnation. But we do need and we still have the guidance and illumination of the Spirit. The Christ we have and on whom growing light is being cast by the Spirit, is not alone the Christ of the Gospels. They are vital but they are not complete. He is the Christ of the Old Testament and of the whole dispensation which led to Him. Pre-eminently, He is the Christ of the epistles, the Christ unfolded, analyzed, explicated under guidance of the Spirit. New truth will be new truth about Him and the whole range of experience which He opens and

constantly enlarges. There came a day when our Lord said an almost incidental word about the disciples' knowledge of the Father. Philip saith unto Him, Lord, show us the Father and we shall be satisfied. It was one of the most profound of all human words. Just that, but only that, will satisfy the hearts of men whom God has made for Himself. But the word struck across the heart of Jesus like a chilling breeze and He said, Have I been so long time with you and dost not thou know me? He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father. And what then was needed—a new revelation of the Father? No, but that revelation understood, that revelation analyzed, that revelation worked out. A new exploration of Christ would bring Philip more knowledge than he had yet guessed was there. We shall bring the new truth out of the old treasures.

Shortly after John Henry Newman left the Church of England for the Roman Church, a former intimate friend met him and ventured to ask him why he had left the Church in which they had both worked. He tells that after a moment's hesitation, Newman replied, "Because I desired a horizon to my theology."¹ It is fatal desire. The only way to have such an horizon to one's theology as Newman wanted is never to lift one's eyes, never to climb the heights of God, for as one rises or as one's eyes grow trained to the distant view, the horizon

¹Quoted by Gillie, *Evangelicalism*, 113.

pushes farther and farther out. The old view is still here, but the new vistas add to its beauty and enrich its glories.

Or, to take the far finer simile of Jesus, as He teaches in His treasury He finds an always enriching collection from which He may draw. He does not lose zest for the old, but His life is always quickened by the new. Even the old is beautified by the new. All the while He knows that He will never reach the end, that there is still more which the living Spirit will reveal to Him. With that faith He goes on sure of the future because He is sure of God.

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