

THE DOGMATIC TEACHING OF BIBLE TRUTHS

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The question suggested is very broad; it is not in what manner dogmatic truth can be best presented, which would be much narrower, but it is what attitude we should assume in regard to the dogmatic teaching of Bible truths. Thus the whole question is open for consideration, whether Bible truths are to be taught dogmatically or not. The question itself does indeed suggest the answer, which many of us, I hope all of us, will unhesitatingly give. For it suggests a guiding principle, in the implied assertion that we are in possession of Bible truths, that is of truths given to us by immediate inspiration of God the Holy Spirit. Let the force of this one expression be considered. We have things to teach which are truths, not guesses, not theories, not conjectures, but truths, and therefore as the nature of all truth is, immutable. They are Bible truths and therefore part of the faith once for all delivered to the saints. They are contained in a book which comes from God to man, and which consequently, since the designs of God do not change on one side, and the wants of men's souls can admit of no modification on the other, can not change with lapse of years or alteration of manners. They are truths relative to the most practical subject which could possibly exercise the thoughts of a reasonable being, namely, how he is to find pardon and acceptance with God. They are truths with which the Church is put into charge with the solemn commission to go and preach them to all nations. If we believe that we are in possession of such Bible truths, the question whether a dogmatic teaching is to be maintained is no longer open. It is settled so far as we are concerned by the higher authority of God.

There appears to me to be incalculable comfort to the heart and rest to the mind in thus falling back upon a principle. What is right must be wise, because righteousness and wisdom are two rays from the same Sun, two attributes of the one perfect God. To strike a balance between contradictory expediences is the most anxious and difficult of tasks which may make the brain weary and the heart sick. Take, for instance, the general subject of today, how the Church of England is to maintain her place in the hearts of the English people. The English people are a very compound thing and comprise a vast diversity of opinions, feelings and interest. One portion of the English people are utterly indifferent to all religious truth; another portion are impatient of anything like a dogma, with an intensity of infidel intolerance to which the asserted bigotry of Protestants is as nothing; another portion are too utterly contemptuous of the faith to care one feather whether we teach it or not; another are craving for truth they have not found; and others so fond of dogma that they are seared by the very statement of a doubt as a child is scared by a ghost. Who is to balance these several parties together, and decide, on grounds of expediency, which it is wisest to please, which safest to displease? One person tells us that we must rub off the sharp edges of doctrinal truth, and hide with the pretty ornaments of rhetoric the wholesome bitterness and offence of the Cross. O! cries another, if you do not take care the age will leave you behind, till, the tide of free thought flowing in, the Church will be left like a stranded wreck—solitary and alone. A third gravely recommends that we should sweep away all doctrines save the bare letter of the Apostles' Creed, or a declaration of faith in the Trinity. Yet another chides our faith for maintaining what he conceives to be the useless niceties of doctrine instead of preaching the broad gospel of universal philanthropy and benevolence. What mortal intellect can with any confidence so balance the number and influence of all these respective sections as to say, on the argument of mere expediency, what we ought to do or ought not to do? One friend believes the heart of the people to be Protestant and Evangelical. A second believes that the whole nation is fast going over to Popery. A third shouts in our ears, and men of the highest scientific eminence adopt the cry, that Christianity is a dead thing, and cannot last another ten years. I turn from this Babel of sounds, with the deepest gratitude, to the calm, clear, unfaltering voice of God. I step from this shifting sand

of expediency to the solid rock of duty, and breathe freely as I feel that firm foundation beneath my feet. Did not God know all, foresee all, foredetermine all when He gave us that Bible which sketches all the struggles of the Church till her Master comes again? Was not every changing mood and circumstance of the world, every fancy and caprice of human nature, every contingency of human events, present to His mind? If the Bible be of God, and if the Bible, which is of God, does not suggest theories for discussion, but propounds truths for belief, then I can no more alter God's order of grace than I can derange his order in nature, or pull the sun out of yonder sky. I can indeed at midday shut the light out of my own chamber, and, closing every crevice, declare that it is midnight; but it will not be midnight nevertheless—outside my narrow room a rejoicing world will bask meanwhile in the glorious sunshine. Earthly mists may wrap in gloom the ground on which we walk, or driving tempests hurry through the lower atmosphere; but the clear heights of heaven, are above them, and the calm sun in his strength looks down all the same on the darkness and storm below.

I conclude, therefore, that if there are Bible truths there must also be a dogmatic teaching of those truths. But though we cannot change the doctrines, may we not adapt to the circumstances of the day the mode in which we teach them? I believe that we may. And I believe that as to the manner of dogmatic teaching, as well as to the necessity of dogmatic teaching, the same words which I take as my keynote may still suffice to teach us "Bible truths." In the propriety of adapting our mode of teaching to the needs of the times, I entirely agree with our critics, although I may differ from them widely asunder as the antipodes as to the mode of applying the principle.

1. We should teach Bible truths as truths—teach as those who believe them to be truths, not probabilities for conjecture, not theories for discussion, not themes for intellectual exercise, but as truths which we hold and proclaim as from God. The commission of Ezekiel is our commission also. "I do send thee unto them, and thou shalt say unto them, Thus saith the Lord; and they, whether they hear or whether they forbear, shall know that there hath been a prophet among them."

But I must explain. I do not mean that we should teach Bible truths with a temper or tone of personal dogmatism. Certainty of the truth need not grow into hardness or severity in propounding it. The more true it is, the more fixed and certain to the convictions of our own minds as expressing the will and carrying with it the authority of God, the more quiet and gentle we may be in the proclamation of it. Perfect faithfulness in the message may coexist with perfect humility in the delivery. There is no contrariety between truth and love. Hence there should be firmness as to the matter, with the utmost gentleness as to the manner—adherence to things without any impatience of persons. Remember the Arab fable of Abraham turning a stranger out of his shelter into the storm because he was shocked with the stranger's heterodoxy, and God's reply, "I have borne with him for five and seventy years; canst not thou bear with him for one night?"

Nor do I mean that every matter of theological opinion is to be put by us on the same platform as Bible truth—the truth, for instance, of the fall and sin, the atonement, justification by faith, regeneration by the Spirit, and doctrines of the same kind. We must be jealously and prayerfully cautious not to confound secondary truths with primary truths, circumstantials with essentials. But this is so large a theme that I must not pursue it.

Neither do I mean that we are to teach them on Church authority, but on the authority of God—not alone as truths, but as Bible truths. This is the fatal mistake which many members of the Church of England make, and to which expression was given in a recent letter published in the *Times*—the mistake of confounding authority with testimony. We may avail ourselves of the authority of the Church in regard to Scriptural doctrine, but we receive it only on the authority of the Bible. A more fatal mistake in dogmatic teaching than that of always thrusting the Church forward instead of the Church's Master I cannot conceive. No plea is so fitted to irritate and provoke opposition and to arm the minds of men in this age of liberty against the truths we wish to commend, and no plea can

be more false or more dangerous. For if we receive truth on the authority of the Church, then *whatever* has the authority of the Church must be received as truth, whatever it may be, or however false. It is in fact the essential plea of the Church of Rome, and no Protestant dress can change or long conceal its essentially Popish features.

Nor do I mean that we are to teach dogma as a thing to supersede reason, and so put it offensively with a "must,"—you must believe this; but we should teach it as a thing which appeals to reason. The credentials of the Bible are open to every man's investigation. Let man satisfy himself that this particular truth is contained in the Bible just as we teach it, neither more nor less. It must at all times be difficult for human pride to receive the humbling doctrines of the Cross. Let us not needlessly irritate it, but speak rather in the gracious tone of God, "Come now and let us reason together, saith the Lord."

But I mean that we are to teach Bible truths with firmness and confidence, and a full, entire persuasion in their truths, not timidly, not hesitatingly, not doubtfully, as those who are but groping for truth themselves and have to find out their own faith, but as those who have found it, and love it, and live on it, who find in it the light of their intellect and the joy of their hearts. I believe this personal conviction to be of the essence of all persuasion. I conceive that they are thoroughly wrong who proposed to cure men's doubts by doubting themselves. And I cannot but think the Evangelical Church may learn a lesson alike from our Ritualistic opponents and from Rome herself. We must never forget that Rome exercises moral power not alone over the weak, the ignorant and uneducated, but over some of the subtlest intellects, profoundest scholars, and deepest thinkers of the day. What commends her to these men but the rest and repose which her tone and air of authority supply to minds sick with doubt and desperate with scepticism? They need to rest somewhere, and in the ignorance of the true infallibility, the infallibility of God, they rest on a false infallibility, the infallibility of the Church. The soul does need an infallible guide, and we have it in the unerring Word and omniscient Spirit of all truth, who interprets that word to the intellect and the heart. I have no wish to copy Rome, or to forget the gulf into which she is blindfold precipitating herself. But *Fas est et ab hoste doceri*. Rome is wise after the wisdom of the children of this world, at all events. She does not, I believe, mistake the spirit and tendency of the age when she offers to the weary brain rest within her bosom from all tormenting doubts. Let us offer the same rest; only let it be the bosom of God and the truth of that word of which not one jot or one tittle shall ever pass away till all be fulfilled.

Our attitude should, therefore, be that not of the doubter, but of the worshipper; not of the inquirer, but of the teacher; not of the philosopher, but of the prophet commissioned by God. We should teach Bible truths with firmness of tone and clearness and precision of statement, with all the edges of doctrine clean cut and sharply defined, as we find them in the Word. We should teach them tenderly and affectionately, on their moral side rather than on their theological; treating doctrines not as so many propositions of divinity, but as to many precious truths needed by men's souls, and which alone can give to the struggling heart either peace or glory hereafter. We should teach them experimentally, out of the fulness of our own hearts, as those who live upon them ourselves, and know them in our personal experience to be precious, or rather know Him to be precious who gathers round his own glorious self all doctrine, and in his own single person all fulness of grace and truth. Lastly, we should teach them with constant reference to the Holy Spirit of God as alone able to explain them to the mind, or to open an entrance for them into the heart. So teaching them we shall, I believe, do God's will. Whether we please man or not, we shall please our Master, and pleasing Him shall find in his will our surest and safest guide for the present, and in his loving care the most ample and effectual provision for the dangers and perplexities of the future.