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## THE NATURE AND VALUE OF THEOLOGY.

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It is with a deep sense of unworthiness that I come to this hour.

This painful consciousness of unfitness has been mine from the day I sat down in the seat of Thornwell, Girardeau and other distinguished occupants of the chair of theology in Columbia Seminary. Two thoughts I have carried on my heart and conscience. The first is the thought of the difficulty of my position. Few tasks, surely, are so arduous as his who is called to serve the cause of religion in the chair of theology. To fulfil such a ministry with an efficiency worthy of Christ requires an order of talent and a measure of scholarship to which I make no claim. The other thought which has burdened me has been the thought of the magnitude and importance of the trust committed to me. Serious and awful are the duties of a teacher in a school which aims to prepare men to continue the work begun by the Son of God Himself, and shared by prophets and apostles. Who is sufficient for the task of training men to be fit and faithful stewards of the manifold grace of God for a lost world? Not one! It is an office for two—God and His man. In conscious weakness I have entreated the Lord to sit with me in this chair, pleading the futility of my sitting there alone.

Onerous and solemn as are the responsibilities of this place,

I am grateful for the honor and privilege of bearing them. I have tried to magnify my office in my thought and teaching, and do now wish to magnify it in your thought and appreciation. Theology needs to have a good word spoken for it. It needs definition and defense. It is in disfavor. It is a fashion of the times to belittle theology. From pulpit and platform you hear, in newspapers and magazines and books you read, words spoken or written in disparagement of theology. Even Billy Sunday has to have his fling at theological seminaries. He says they take candidates for the ministry, cast them in a theological mould, and keep them until they are cold; and then send them out. And the implication is, that the effect of theological training is to refrigerate the world rather than to regenerate it. The last International Sunday School Convention, which met in Kansas City, was openly hostile to theology. The speaker, says Dr. J. E. Abbott, who did not take a thrust at theology was out of style and would have been regarded as having missed an opportunity. In connection with the announcement of the new curricula to be formed by experts the boast was made that the ministry with its theology was to be eliminated. Scientific laymen are to have the leadership. It will be an evil day for the Church when the teaching of its schools is determined by men who have no theology or a false one.

The new theology writers have little or no use for theology, old or new. No doctrine is held by them to be essential. In their opinion if all the creeds and dogmas of the Church were set aside, nothing would be lost. Dogma is dead or dying, according to them. They grow quite dogmatic in their denial of dogma. Even in Scotland, which we have come to think of as the home of sound learning, the emphasis has shifted from theology to philosophy, according to the statement of one of their leaders. Ill fares the land where philosophy flourishes and theology decays.

In their underestimate of doctrinal teaching some go the length of adopting in effect as their watchword, "Religion without theology." "Give us the facts, never mind about theories." It sounds like a praiseworthy demand for simplicity and reality.

It is not so praiseworthy as it seems, not praiseworthy at all; indeed, it is highly foolish. This disparagement of doctrine has gone on till this noble subject is much depreciated in popular opinion. The impression is made that theology should go to the discard as outgrown, out of date and useless.

Now let us frankly admit that there have been a spirit and method in dogmatics which deserve condemnation and rejection. There is a scholastic method of teaching which lacks value for life. It is an academic discussion of truth with little or no concern for the end of truth, viz., holiness of heart and life. The theology which emerges from this treatment of truth is a stiff and lifeless body. Its interest is in logic rather than life, in system rather than service. This type of theology "gave no scope to the play of Christian feeling. It exhibited truth, nakedly and baldly, in its objective reality, without any reference to the subjective conditions which, under the influence of the Spirit, that truth was fitted to produce. It was a dry digest of theses and propositions, perfect in form, but cold and lifeless as a skeleton." Its aim was knowledge only, not godliness.

Such theologizing is objectionable and unprofitable. It is over-intellectual, content with barren orthodoxy of statement. We have no quarrel with those who dislike and set at naught this kind of teaching. But we protest against their belittlement and banishment of all theology. Criticism should be intelligent and discriminating. Wholesale judgment and rejection are without excuse.

I wonder how many of these contemners of theologians and their theology have considered what theology is in its proper spirit and service. How many know when one is theologizing? One may theologize and not be aware of it. I am reminded of the plain man who learned with surprise that he had been speaking prose all his life and did not know it.

One boy said to another, what is theology? After a moment's thought the second boy said, theology is the science of theories. That definition provokes a smile at the expense of theology. That boy seems to have expressed the thought of many; to them theology is the science of theories. Well, that

is not bad, if you know the meaning of words. What is a theory? What gives rise to theorizing? A theory is an attempted explanation. A true theory is a real explanation. An explanation of a thing brings out the meaning of the thing. The theory of the cross is the interpretation of the cross, opening and alleging its meaning and message. Theology, then, according to the lad's definition is the science of interpretations, of meanings. What could be nobler than that or more desirable? If that is the true idea of theology, let us have more of it, not less. A desideratum of the Church is a vital and vigorous theology. That is the thesis I wish to maintain. For my subject is, *The Nature and Value of Theology*.

#### I. THE NATURE OF THEOLOGY.

It is a science, a form of knowledge. It deals with facts, facts of history and experience, of literature and life—of inspired literature and life. It differs from other sciences not in spirit and method, but in the materials with which it works. Its facts are not physical, but religious, moral, spiritual. The view of theology I like best defines it as the science of religion. Religion is one of the primary facts and forces of the world. Its phenomena are vast and varied, its influence and service universal and indispensable. To ignore or deny these facts is unscientific and unphilanthropic—opposed to human welfare.

Religion is the chief concern  
Of mortals here below;  
May they its great importance learn,  
Its sov'reign virtue know.

Theology in the narrow sense is a discourse about God, His being, nature and attributes. But in the broad sense of the term theology is conversant about the whole vast field of religious truth. It covers all the departments of the course of study offered in the seminary. Our school is called a theological seminary, not a seminary of languages, or of Bible, or of history, or of missions. but of theology, which term com-

prises all the others. There is exegetical theology, which has to do with the written records of revelation and religion; there is historical theology, which is occupied with the history and growth of the Christian religion; there is systematic theology, which is concerned with the definition, arrangement and defense of the doctrinal contents of our religion; and there is practical theology, which has to do with the application of truth in the work of the ministry.

What is the glorious object of religion? God, the mighty Maker of heaven and earth. What is the great subject of religion? Man, the image of God and the lord of creation. What is the chief end of religion? The glorifying of God and the enjoyment of Him forever. What is the sole rule of religion? The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, the most inspired and inspiring literature ever given to man. What is the field of religion? The whole inhabited earth. What and where is God? Who is Jesus Christ? What is the origin of the world? What is the origin of man? What is he and whither is he going? What is sin? What is grace? How shall a man be just with God? If a man die, shall he live again? The interest and importance of these and kindred topics are indicated by the number of books which they have elicited and still do elicit. If we may estimate our science from the sublimity and scope of the subjects of which it treats and the nobility of the ends which it serves, we shall place it, with Aristotle, Locke and Thornwell, at the head of all human knowledge. Not only is it the most exalted of the sciences, it is the most comprehensive in its significance, in that it occupies a central position with reference to the rest. It supplies the right viewpoint from which all science should start and to which it should ever return, namely, the theistic view of the world. So that without theology all other knowledge is false or fragmentary.

The motive of science is love of truth. The method of science is observation and examination, accumulation and classification, interpretation and articulation. The end of science is knowledge, systematized knowledge. The end of knowledge is life, fuller life and freer. The motive, then, of theology is

love of highest truth. The method of theology is collection and comparison, construction and correlation of religious data. The end of theology is knowledge, a logical and coherent system, a living body of divine truth, which is according to godliness. The end of this knowledge is life, life as high and holy as the heavens and more enduring than they. The central import of supernatural religion is holiness of heart to the glory of God. It is for salvation and redemption, for power and ministry. And theology is the truth of supernatural religion interpreted and concatenated and vindicated that it may be incorporated in human life and character. In other words, the intended result and issue of dogmatics is apologetics and ethics, munitions of defense and men after the manner of the Divine Man.

If this is the nature of theology, is it something to be decried or discarded? No, no. And we shall answer with a more intelligent and emphatic negative after considering—

## II. THE VALUE OF THEOLOGY.

1. With this end in view consider, first, more particularly the relation and contribution of theology to religion. The relation of theology to religion is somewhat the same as the relation of botany to plants, and of astronomy to the planets. You may have and enjoy flowers without botany, and stars without astronomy. Yes, and you may have religion without theology. Theology is not experimental religion, and experimental religion is not theology. Shall we dispense with theology, then? No more than we should dispense with botany or astronomy. You cannot understand flowers without botanizing—studying their structure, classification, growth and relations. And you cannot understand the heavens without astronomizing. It is botany that opens to you the meaning and mystery of plant life, and without astronomy you can form no proper conception of the nature and extent of the material creation. It is the function of the physical sciences to reveal the order and beauty and wonder of the world. Every common

bush is aflame with the glory of God to him of the seeing eye and understanding heart.

“To me the meanest flower that blows  
Can give thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.”

Why? Because Wordsworth had the seeing eye and sensitive soul.

“Flower in the crannied wall,  
I pluck you out of the crannies,  
I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,  
Little flower, but if I could understand  
What you are, root and all, and all in all,  
I should know what God and man is.”

The service of the sciences is to unfold the hidden meanings about us, and enable us to think God's thoughts after him. What are men more than stones or clods, if unilluminated and un-inspired by the light of things as they are? Let us then have more science, not less, and that reverently taught in the interest of wonder and worship.

Theology, when cultivated in its own proper spirit, performs a similar service in the sphere of religion. Revelation and redemption are packed full of meanings and mysteries. These need to be discovered and brought into the light. God has not given us a science of religion any more than of theology or chemistry. In His words and works He has supplied the raw materials of theology. The Bible is not truth in systematic form. There is order in the book by inspiration given, and progress; through it one increasing purpose runs; yet its teachings upon its great subjects are scattered through its pages from Genesis to Revelation. In the Bible we have the scattered members of a body of divinity. It is the task of the theologian to collect these separated parts, and adjust and compact them into an organic whole, in order that men may see not only truths as distinct entities, but truth in its unity.

To understand the universe it is not enough to see in-

dividual stars sailing in solitary splendor through the sea of space, but these as grouped in systems, smaller systems in larger, all moving in perfect order and harmony, one vast whole, the majestic symphony of the skies. So religious truth is not understood in isolation, but in relation and association. Not all truth is reality; there is a truth of relation as well as of reality. The whole truth is the reality of things as they are in themselves and in their relations. It is the task and service of theology to exhibit religious truths, each by itself alone, and in relation and combination with other truths; that the light of each may blend and brighten with the light of all.

“All are needed by each one,  
Nothing is fair or good alone.  
I yield myself to the perfect whole.”—Emerson.

To be more definite and analytical: (1) Theology serves the cause of religion by defining truth. That is, by interpreting the facts of religion, threading the facts with meaning, giving the truth they contain revealing statement. No fact has value for life until interpreted. The business of theology is interpretation and adjustment of truth to truth.

(2) Theology serves and conserves religion by discriminating between truth and error. There have been many false teachers, and there will be many more—not consciously false, not intentional enemies of the cross of Christ, but avowed friends of it. Yet they mix truth with error or present truth in disproportion, pressing one truth too far to the damage of other truths. Such teaching is confusing and corrupting. Great theological minds, masters of truth, has rendered the cause of religion and righteousness inestimable service in separating truth from error, and in saving truth from distortion, perversion and defeat.

(3) Theology has aided religion by defending the truth. There have been and will be not only errorists to be righted, but enemies to be opposed. From the beginning the Christian religion has been assailed, and history will repeat itself to the end. A man is not left undisturbed in the possession and en-



joyment of his religion. He may prefer and decide not to think out and define, express and formulate his religion in doctrinal statements. But anti-Christian thinkers will not leave him alone. They advance antagonistic theories which must be met or religion will suffer loss. So the Christian is compelled to define in order to defend.

(4) Once more, theology is invaluable to religion for propagation, for furtherance as well as defense. Christianity is not static but dynamic. Its genius is altruistic and aggressive. It exists to spread. And it makes its way by teaching, taking root and reaching out, reaching out and taking root. It cannot proceed and succeed without doctrine. We cannot dispense religion long or well, if we dispense with doctrine. But doctrine is theology, teaching doctrine is theologizing! So the demand for religion without theology is an impossible one. It would defeat Christianity.

2. In determining the value of theology consider in the second place its relation and contribution to life and character. In speaking a moment ago of the value of theology to religion, I was thinking of religion in its objective aspect as a body of truth. In speaking now of the value of theology to life and character, I am thinking of religion in its subjective aspect as experience, as growth in grace and knowledge, as holiness of heart and behavior.

Theology is indispensable for the maturing of the Christian. Theology, remember, is Christianity in its doctrinal expression. Doctrine is for edification and furnishing, that the man of God may be complete. Without doctrine you may have elementary Christianity, alphabetic piety, infantile personality. Milk is for babes, strong meat, for well-grown and full-grown men. Transition from the early stages to the later stages of Christian growth is made by leaving first principles and going on to perfection through advancing knowledge of the deeper things of God. Omit doctrine, and you will retard development, producing only stunted and dwarfish Christian characters. The growing Christian wants to know the why and wherefore and how of things. Such inquiry leads to investigation and indoctrination. Instruction, systematic teaching, makes in-

telligent Christians and strong, convinced and convincing. The thoroughly indoctrinated are the rooted and grounded, who are not tossed to and fro, and carried about by every wind of doctrine. If you would establish a man, teach him. Plant deep in his mind and heart, as he shall be able to receive it, the whole system of saving knowledge. For men come to stature and strength through digested and assimilated truth. The opponent of doctrine is the enemy of development. To discard dogma and creed would be to hinder character and deed.

I shall never forget Dr. Theodore L. Cuyler's charge to the faculty of Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Va. He made the opening address the year I entered that institution. In the course of his address he spoke of the growing dislike of dogma. He warned the faculty of the danger of yielding in any measure to this rising spirit of unfriendliness to doctrine. Then drawing himself up to his full height and throwing his soul out in one concentrated sentence, he exclaimed: "Sirs, invertebrate these young gentlemen." Invertebration is by indoctrination. Spines are built into the spineless by means of spiritual instruction. A Christian is as sound and strong as his theology. And a church is as sound and strong as its theology. So the cry should be for more theology, not less.

"Let knowledge grow from more to more,  
But more of reverence in us dwell;  
That mind and soul, according well,  
May make one music as before,  
But vaster."

3. In appraising the value of theology, consider in the third place its relation and contribution to a successful gospel ministry. Some one asked Dr. L. M. Sweet, of New York City, when he was in Columbia delivering his lectures on the Smyth Foundation, if the preacher could afford to preach doctrine. He said, "He cannot afford to preach anything else." Indeed, there is nothing else to preach. And to preach doctrine is to enter the domain of theology. "Theology is religious truth presented in its logical connection and dependence." "Theo-

logy is the articulation of religion. The religion of the inarticulate is nonsense." Theology is religion in its doctrinal contents. What are we called to preach, if not the content of Christianity?

There is a demand for practical as distinguished from doctrinal preaching. The demand is foolish, as if doctrine were not practical. So-called practical men scorn idealism, unmindful that history exposes their folly. It has been idealism that has made the statesmen, inspired the patriots, animated the reformers and liberators—the men of mighty deeds and constructive service.

The leaders and redeemers of mankind have all been idealists, Jesus Christ supremely so. The prejudice against doctrine is just as absurd as that against idealism.

There are three parts to preaching. The first is witnessing. This is elementary and introductory. After that, teaching and exhortation, interpretation and application. The deep work is the didactic. On the doctrine is based the exhortation and the appeal. Paul's epistles are first doctrinal, then practical. The epistles to the Hebrews, magnificent in its argument and appeal, is doctrine interspersed with exhortation. First doctrine, then duty. First exposition, interpretation, then application. Exhortation without doctrine behind it is weak and ineffectual. Exhortation and appeal are most powerful and moving when the doctrinal truth of the gospel is behind them in the mind of preacher and of hearer. Phillips Brooks is reported to have said that to be most effective, hortatory preaching must have back of it heaven-high and hell-deep gospel truth. Duties spring out of doctrines, and doctrines inspire duties. Therefore preach doctrine practically and practice doctrinally.

"The progress of doctrine in the past," says Dr. A. H. Strong, "has been marked by successive stages. Athanasius treated of the Trinity; Augustine, of sin; Anselm, of the atonement; Luther, of justification; Wesley, of regeneration. And each of these unfoldings of doctrine was accompanied by religious awakenings." May we not say, was productive of religious awakenings? Does not history warrant the expect-

tation that widespread revivals would follow fresh, searching and persistent discussion of great doctrinal matters throughout the Church?

So, in the light of its nature and its services, we say with conviction that the subject of theology is of transcendent and permanent interest and importance. There is no danger that theology will be finally discarded as antiquated and useless. Dr. Francis G. Peabody thinks the world is even now witnessing a recall to theology. He says, and I believe truly, that human nature is incurably theological. He says further, "That instead of being an outgrown science, theology is the passionate interest of millions of plain people. The loose and fruitless thinking on great themes is an indication, not that the world has outgrown theology, but that if theology is not promoted by trained and disciplined scholars, then it is sure to fall into the hands of untrained and undisciplined minds." The whole subject of religion needs to be rescued from irreverent and incompetent hands. If the Christian life is thus to be rescued, "theology must once more issue its proclamation of emancipation, 'Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.' If the Christian Church is to justify its leadership in the modern world, this must be not merely through its reformatory spirit or philanthropic zeal, but through its clear and convincing thinking on the great themes of God and man. The future of the Christian religion is to be made secure, not by sheltering minds from the modern world, but by training minds to interpret the modern world."

I would, therefore, issue a call for a return to theology. Learn to think and preach theologically. Beware of merely speculative theology, merely academic discussions, detached from the practical ends of life and godliness; but preach theology—that is, present in a sane, satisfactory and popular manner, the great doctrines of redeeming grace, and thus "open to a bewildered world the way of life." If we fulfil with intelligence and finish with joy, the ministry we have received from the Lord Jesus to declare the whole counsel of God, theology will constitute the backbone of our pulpit work. A ministry

devoid of doctrinal content lacks foundation and framework to give it power and permanence.

Fellow-ministers of the everlasting gospel of the blessed God, noble is our heritage and inspiring is our privilege. The Bible is the unexhausted quarry of divine truth. Out of it the master workmen of the past have taken precious stones, and, having shaped them according to the wisdom given them of God, have builded them into an imposing cathedral. Within the precincts of this cathedral it is ours to serve. It may not be given to us to bring out new stones and conform them to their place in the rising temple of truth; but it is given to us to show to admiring worshippers the stones which others have shaped and set in their places, and to point out the symmetry and beauty of the splendid structure.

And what an edifice this cathedral is. "Built," as Dr. Patton has eloquently said, "upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ being the chief cornerstone, its walls are salvation and its gates are praise. Buttressed on the one side by the truths of reason, the facts of our moral nature, and the great defenses of the theistic view of the world; and on the other side by the monumental defenses of the Bible's supernatural claims and the historic foundations of our faith, there has been built into its structure the Bible's teaching of 'What man is to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man.' The principles which underlie human society are there, and there are to be found the truths which lend majesty to human law. The keystone of every arch is marked with the symbol which stands for *Jesus hominum salvator*. The lofty roof invites the upward look, and it rests upon the reasons that support the eternal hope. Its storied windows keep alive the memory of great constructive thinkers—Augustine, Anselm, Calvin. Its mural tablets tell of the victories which have been won upon the battlefields of faith, and speak of Nice, Chalcedon, Augsburg, Dort and Westminster. From the choir come the voices of Christian singers, ancient, mediaeval and modern, who notwithstanding the divisions in the sacramental host of God's elect, proclaim the truth that 'All the servants of our King in heaven and earth are one.' The odor

of incense pervades the building, and the voice of prayer softens the harsh words of controversy. As I stand in mute admiration of this edifice there comes over me the feeling that it is crowded with worshippers.

“And now the deep-voiced organ begins to speak. In successive waves and with increasing volume the flow of harmony goes down the nave, across the transepts, past the columns, through the arches, up to the vaulted roof, and reaches its climax in an outburst of triumphant joy when the great assembly, moved by some sudden inspiration, rises to its feet, translates this wordless anthem into speech, and sings with loud acclaim, Alleluia, The Lord Omnipotent reigneth!”