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THE WORD OF GOD

An Address by

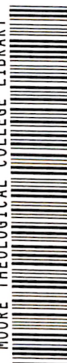
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Trinity Sermon No. 5



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An Address given by
PROFESSOR M.A. JEEVES, M.A., Ph.D.
at
HOLY TRINITY CHURCH, ADELAIDE.

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The purpose of Scripture Union week throughout Australia has been to encourage the intelligent and thoughtful reading of the Bible. The fact that such an effort is worthwhile is based on two assumptions. First of all, that the Bible is true, and, secondly, that it is relevant to life in the mid-twentieth century. And certainly today we are not justified in assuming that either of these two presuppositions is by any means common currency in the thinking of our contemporaries; and for this reason I should like to begin this evening by giving you a brief historical sketch of the way in which the contemporary view of the Bible has arisen.

Many people today feel not only that Scripture is unreliable, but they also believe that there is a conflict between Science and Scripture. And since the Bible is the source book of Christianity, the fact that people think it unreliable means that they also cast serious doubts upon the validity of Christian belief. It is against this background of popular unbelief that I want to examine the facts of the case.

About three hundred years ago, in London, the Royal Society was founded. Since its foundation the Society has included in its membership many of the most distinguished scholars in the British Commonwealth, men who have dedicated their lives to the pursuit of Science. It is interesting that the founder members of this Society saw nothing incongruous in dedicating their scientific work to 'the glory of God'. As we look a little more closely at the founding of the Royal Society, we find that not a few of the most eminent scientists are also known to have been devout Christians. By 'Christians' I do not mean people who pay lip service to Christianity or have a formal membership of a church, but, rather, the possession of a sincere and deep Christian faith, which was a major factor in their lives.

One of the founders of the Royal Society, Robert Boyle, regarded by many people as the founder of Chemistry, played a great part not only in the foundation of the Royal Society but also gave a great deal of his time and effort to missionary work and to the financing of the translation of the Scriptures. Likewise Kepler, the great astronomer; Newton, perhaps the greatest of all British scientists; Michael Faraday; Joule, Lord Kelvin, Clerk Maxwell, Lord Rayleigh, Sir J.J. Thompson - all of these great men of Science were also devout Christians. It is interesting in passing to note that the men who formed the basis of modern physics - of nineteenth and twentieth century physics - were all deeply religious men: Kelvin, Rayleigh, Maxwell, Stokes and Thompson.

And it wasn't only in physics and chemistry that the great scientists were also devout Christians. At Cambridge, in the first half of the nineteenth century there was little or no Science at all, and the credit for creating an interest in Science is due to two deeply religious men; Adam Sedgwick, the Professor of Geology and J.S. Henslow, the Professor of Botany. We are told that part of the witness of the Professor of Geology was found in the time he spent preaching to the miners at Newcastle.

Time will not allow me to go on into all the detail possible on this point, but let us content ourselves with establishing this: that many of the great men of Science were also sincere Christians. We may add to them men from other fields like Lord Lister, to whom we owe the benefits of anti-septic surgery; Jenner, the discoverer of vaccination; Pasteur, the founder of micro-biology; Sir Joseph Barcroft, the great physiologist - and many others. And I hope that this very brief review will at least show that there is little basis for the statement that a training in scientific method makes it impossible to accept Christianity for these were the men who made the scientific method. Neither is there the slightest evidence for the accusation sometimes brought against these men that they kept their Science and their faith in two watertight compartments in their minds - they most certainly did not.

Some, however, may say, 'Ah, yes. But that is just the past. What of the present? - and the future?' Now, here, naturally, the facts are not so easy to get at, but if you look at the obituary notices of the Fellows of the Royal Society today, you will find that at least as many of them are recorded as being devout Christians as not; and certainly of the younger men there's no doubt that many of those who are young research scientists are also devout Christians.

We may summarise what I have said so far by asserting that the evidence I put before you supports the view that one finds about the same proportion of Christian men among scientists as one does among people in other walks of life.

'Well', you may say, 'If this is the case, how is it that the popular belief is that you can no longer believe the Bible because of something that Science, or scientists, have said?'.

I think there are several reasons why this popular belief is held; among them we should include first of all the fact that there is 'news value' if a prominent scientist asserts his disbelief in one of the basic tenets of the Christian faith; but there is no news value in the fact that for every one like him, there are others who quietly believe in orthodox Christianity. There is no news value, of course, in their quiet faith.

Secondly, I would put it down to the way in which scientific results are put before the general public, the non-scientific public, by popular writers of Science. They, of course, are always looking for something 'newsy', something unusual, and they very easily exaggerate the facts of Science and express any supposed conflict with religion as strongly as possible.

Lastly, there is the fact that many people who already hold an atheistic political system are not slow to use the supposed conflict between Science and faith as a propaganda tool in order to encourage disbelief in God.

Certainly, today, at least among scientists, the echoes of the great nineteenth century conflict between theologians and scientists have almost died away, and once more they pursue their callings in peace, side by side. Furthermore, I believe this is a peace with honour and not a dishonourable truce. For, today, we regard scientific statements and Biblical statements as complementary and not as conflicting. Let me illustrate what I mean.

When we read in the Bible that the Lord Jesus Christ said that the sun rises upon the just and the unjust, we do not imagine that this statement is in any way in competition with a statement that might be made by an astronomer who would describe the motion of the sun in terms of Kepler's and other laws; or, to put it another way, we shall soon find ourselves in trouble if we regard the Bible as a text book of twentieth century Science. And, of course, twentieth century Science may well be out-of-date in fifty years' time. Instead, we regard the Bible as a record of God's dealings with men, and of his purposes for men, both in the present and in the future. In short, the scientific and the Christian accounts are not, in fact, trying to answer the same kind of question.

Now then, in the simple form in which I have put it in these last few words this new way of regarding the relation between scientific and Biblical statements may seem too slick. Too facile, that is, to answer some of the great questions that have puzzled Christian men for centuries. And if it doesn't seem slick and facile, it ought to! - because it certainly is not a universal panacea designed to allow us to isolate Christian thinking from our scientific thinking for, whilst it shows us how not to relate the two, it still leaves us to discover how we should connect the facts that God teaches us through scientific enquiry with the revelation we believe He inspired men to embody in the Scriptures. And this is a matter I want to return to in a moment. It's really part of a very much wider question, namely, the question of how are we to interpret Scripture?

This is a vast subject and I must needs be brief. But I would suggest that when we read our Bibles, basically there are three questions we want to ask to begin with. First of all, what does it say? - not 'what would I like it to say'. Secondly, what did it mean at the time that it was written; and, thirdly, what does it mean to me today? But, having said this, I'd like to suggest three principles, three of many that we could think of, but three most important ones to bear in mind when we try and interpret the Bible. First of all, we must interpret the Bible literally. By this, we mean that we should take the natural and the normal sense of each passage as it is found in Scripture. We should take it, in its context, as it was written for the original readers. This is all we mean by taking the Bible literally, and yet, this is a very much misunderstood and misrepresented principle in some circles. At the same time we need to remember that the Bible is full of lots of different literary forms. There is poetry in the Bible; there are long prose passages; there are arguments, debates, disputes; and unless we are careful we shall get ourselves into trouble by not first of all finding out what kind of literature it is we are reading. For example, the Bible speaks pictorially or figuratively. We realise this, do we not, when we think of our Lord described as 'the Lamb of God', or 'the Lion of Judah'? This is pictorial language, figurative language, and we need to watch out for it.

First, then, we must interpret the Bible literally. Secondly, and the great principle of interpretation, we must compare Scripture with Scripture. It has been said so often you can prove anything from Scripture if you simply take a verse out of its context and fail to find out what is said about the same topic elsewhere in Scripture; and, basically, this principle if followed faithfully is sufficient to enable any man to find God's way of salvation as revealed in Scripture. You don't need commentaries; for all their great usefulness, you don't even need Scripture Union notes to find God's way of salvation though they may help. The simplest person, if he is an honest seeker, can find it by comparing Scripture with Scripture.

The third principle is that we must welcome light from other sources which may help us to discover what Scripture does not mean, and thus also what it does mean. We can illustrate this principle again by reference to some of the supposed conflicts between Science and Scripture. As Christians, as children of God, basically we believe that it is impossible for a scientific discovery given by God to contradict a word given by God. The author, the source, is the same. If, therefore, a scientific discovery - as distinct from a scientific speculation - contradicts what we have believed to be implied by the Bible, it is not a question of error in God's word but error in our way of interpreting it. The classic example, of course, is in Psalm 96 where, until a few centuries ago, verse ten was taken to provide the basis for the belief that the earth does not move, but now of course we know from astronomy that the earth goes round the sun. We had misinterpreted this verse and in this instance our scientific knowledge helped to see what the Bible did not mean. To use a familiar illustration we may regard our Bible as a picture, and you know that if you are looking at a picture and stand only six inches from it, you may see only a little green blotch, but when you stand back four yards, you will see how that particular little green blotch fits into the whole picture. And so it is with the Bible. At times we have to stand right back from the passages and see them as a whole to get their proper meaning. At other times we have to get close to them, as, for example, with some passages in Romans, where we may dissect minutely and still not exhaust their full meaning. So it is with Scripture that in some parts the pattern is very fine grained; in others the pattern must be taken on a large scale because the sentences, if they are taken in isolation, may be quite misleading. But this does not mean that the primary purpose of Scripture is anything other than showing God's way of salvation, and all you need to find this is a hungry, humble soul.

Scientific knowledge does not add anything to the inspired revelation, and the rule still remains: compare Scripture with Scripture.

How are we to profit from reading our Bibles? I've already spoken of how we are to interpret them, but what is the point of it all? How are we to profit from it? We've read the answer to this question this evening in the Second Lesson, in 2 Timothy, 3, verses 14 - 17. You'll remember that in this passage the Apostle Paul, sitting in a Roman prison under sentence of death, is writing those last few words to encourage Timothy, the young Christian leader who was about to have his last human prop removed. To encourage him, that is, to continue in the way that he began. And as he does this he says, in brief, 'Look, Timothy! the way you first of all became a Christian was that you knew the way of salvation through the Scriptures which you've known since you were a child. But now, Timothy, if you are going to go on and remain a Christian, if you're going to fight the good fight to the end, enduring hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ, then you must go on as you began; you must go on knowing and using the Scriptures.' And so it is that the Scriptures are they which make you 'wise unto salvation' through faith which is in Christ Jesus. This, then, is the primary purpose of reading the Bible; in order that one may come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and get to know Him better day by day. This is nothing new. Our Lord tells us this quite clearly. For example, when He is speaking to the Jews, He says, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, and it is they that bear witness to Me". (John, Chapter 5, Verse 39) 'It's Me they write about! - not some abstract theology.' And again, as He spoke to the two disciples on the Emmaus road after His resurrection, we're told that, "beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He expounded unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself". (Luke, Chapter 24, Verse 27) It is Jesus Christ whom the Scriptures write about - right from the beginning to the end; and this is the primary purpose of God's revelation - that we might come to know Him. If our Bible reading does not give us a clearer vision of our Lord, then we are not deriving from it the profit that we should.

But if the primary purpose is that we may come to know Jesus Christ, the secondary purpose that we're told of in this same passage is that all Scripture is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction and for instruction in righteousness. We may summarise the teaching of this verse under two headings.

First of all it teaches that Scripture, when it is read, is profitable for the acquiring of sound doctrine; and along with this, with a refutation of error. This, I believe, is most important in a day when on many sides it is said, 'It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you're really sincere about what you do believe'. It is possible to be sincerely mistaken ... but you're still mistaken. It does matter what you believe, because, apart from any other consideration, the things which you believe make you the sort of person which you become. You do not need a psychologist to tell you this; Scripture tells you it more clearly. In Proverbs we read: 'As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he'. And again Paul when writing to the Philippians, says:-

"Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you."

(Philippians, Chap. 4, Verses 8 & 9)

Again, thinking and doing are closely linked.

But more important even than this: what you believe about Jesus Christ, that is, the doctrine that you have, is of vital importance for this world .. and the next. For either you believe that He is God, that He is the one Mediator between men and God, and that

He died to take away and bear the penalty of your sin, or else you believe that there is some other way to be forgiven; that you can get to Heaven some other way. And that is why the Apostle lays such tremendous stress upon the importance of 'sound doctrine'.

Secondly, I believe this verse teaches that Scripture, when read and obeyed, moulds our characters and makes us the sort of people God wants us to be. The important fact here is obedience. It is quite possible to have a wide knowledge of the teaching of Scripture which, nevertheless, remains quite academic. Some of the most famous heresies of the Church have arisen among people who have known the Scriptures but ignored what they learned there; and if this happens, then Scripture is being misused. For it is only as we obey what God has revealed to us so far that we can go on to the next step in learning what it means to be a Christian. The importance of this obedience is taken up, you remember, by James in his letter when he likens the sort of person who knows what God teaches, and then goes away and forgets all about it, to a person who looks at himself in a mirror and then turns away and forgets what manner of man he is. We read (James 1, 22 and 23), 'But be ye doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves; for if any be a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass; for he beholdeth himself and goeth his way and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was.'. It is that we might have instruction in righteousness that Scripture is given to us. But what is the ultimate aim? What is the final design of all this? It comes in this same passage at the end. It is in order that the man of God may be "perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works". We study the Scriptures in order that we may have that perfection, and in Scripture, perfection means a simple maturity - that we may become mature and balanced. If you are to avoid a one-sided Christian life, you must be constantly enlarging your knowledge of Scripture; and so you will tend towards that perfection which God intends.

But not only will the study of Scripture make you a more mature and balanced person; it will also motivate and equip you to go out and serve Him amongst your fellow-men. The words we read in this passage are 'be furnished unto all good works'. And it is His will that we should bring forth these good works that men may see them and glorify God.

To sum up, then, I've tried to urge that, on the one hand, there are no longer good grounds for holding a supposed conflict between Science and Scripture as an excuse for not reading the Bible; and positively I would urge that we should be prepared to lay aside our prejudices - but not our intellects - and to read the Scriptures with the attitude given to us by our Lord; Himself. If I might paraphrase His words from John 7, 17, when He says: 'If any man is willing to do my will, then he shall know whether what I say is just another human opinion, or from God, Himself.'. God always deals with men at the level of their wills. Such an attitude is one of readiness, readiness to be met by the Word Incarnate as we read the Word written. And such an encounter will carry with it the discovery that there are deep issues to be settled between you and God ... things such as sin, and disobedience; things which necessitate repentance - repentance followed by an attitude of simple trust, so that as you read you will come to know Him, Whom to know is life eternal.

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