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AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANITY

by
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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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"Thus saith the Lord". These words are familiar to every reader of the Bible. They are frequently to be found at the heading of a passage of Scripture and they indicate that the words that follow are the words of God Himself. Taken at their face value they introduce us to an extraordinary fact, namely, that God has made Himself known to us by using human language, human concepts and human ideas. At first sight this might seem to be impossible that the infinite God should be known to man through human words and concepts. In fact, when we are left to our own resources in thinking about God, it is not long before we come up against the impenetrable barrier of analogical language. We soon realize that we can know nothing for sure about what is beyond nature simply by analogies drawn from natural life, and so we could arrive at no sure knowledge of God through using our own thoughts, concepts and language, because from our own resources

we could have no assurance that our experiences have any correspondence at all to a God who by definition is infinite. Therefore man's search for God is doomed to scepticism and agnosticism. How then can the Bible describe God speaking to us in human language? The key is to be found in a most important but neglected passage in Genesis chapter 1, where God said "Let us make man in our own image, after our own likeness". Here we read that man's nature is a reflection of God's nature, so that our thoughts and concepts have a real and not merely analogical correspondence to the thoughts and concepts and nature of God. Had God not created us in His own image we could have had no knowledge of Him or fellowship with Him. But as the Scriptures say, He created us in His own image, after His own likeness, and the purpose was that we might indeed know Him and have fellowship with Him. Thus it comes about that our human language concept is a suitable vehicle for knowledge of God;

but this in itself is not sufficient to give us knowledge of God. It is God who has taken the initiative in making Himself known to us. The phrase "Thus saith the Lord" underlines the fact that we have a revelation from God which is basically supernatural. The Christian knowledge of God does not originate in nature, in our natural thoughts, reflections and ideas, but comes to us from our supernatural creative God and thus it is sure and reliable knowledge.

The revelation in the Old Testament was fully accepted by Christ as being in every respect the supernatural Word of God. Moreover, as the writer to the Hebrews reminded us, God has spoken to us not only through the prophets of the Old Testament but in an even more strikingly supernatural way, through His Son. In Christ God became man without ceasing to be divine. Our Lord, Jesus Christ, is supernatural. He did not arise out of nature, that is, out of the ongoing

course of things as we do, but he entered into nature. Thus he shows us God's own pattern for human life. He not only reveals the mind of God but has reconciled us to God in a supernatural way through bearing our sins, and He has been vindicated in His Saviourhood by His Heavenly Father in that He raised Him from the dead, so confirming to us the promise of eternal life which is given to all who put their faith in Christ.

Authentic Christianity has always been based on supernatural revelation, on the fact that God has spoken. He spoke to Adam; He spoke to Noah; He spoke to Abraham; He spoke to Israel at Sinai; He spoke through the prophets; above all He has spoken through the Lord Jesus Christ and the apostolic testimonies by which alone we know of Jesus Christ. To put it in a nutshell, Christianity has always been based on the fact that the Bible is God's Word and if God's Word, it may be relied upon completely to

bring us to a true knowledge of God and of His will for us and into a true relationship with Him.

The matter could not have been put more clearly than in the statements of the Council of Trent and the First Vatican Council which speak of God the Holy Spirit as the author of Scripture. With this sentiment the whole of christendom has been united in agreement and it is as I say the foundation fact of authentic Christianity. But in recent times there has developed within the Christian community a school of thought which minimises and indeed denies the supernatural character of revelation. It begins by doubting the inspiration of Scripture. It is not long before every aspect of Christian thought and life comes to be affected. I may sketch briefly the progress of this error, which is characterised by the desire to eliminate the supernatural.

Firstly, the Bible comes to be regarded simply as the

record of man's search after God, in contrast to its own testimony that it is God's message to man. The next step is to eliminate the supernatural from the record itself. The miracles which, of course, are signs of God's supernatural power, are explained away, and in particular, as we know from current newspaper controversy, the miracle of the resurrection is eliminated. It is regarded as a myth, that is, the describing as a historical event what was only a spiritual experience of the disciples. It is said that they came to realise that Jesus' death was not the end of His influence or the termination of the effect of His message. He was the one who had set them free from their "unauthentic" existence of being earthbound, of living 'after the flesh'; He had liberated them into the freedom in which He Himself lived, free in Himself and free for others; and by confrontation with Him all men may experience the same freedom. The possibility of this

freedom was expressed by the early disciples for the hearers of their time in the story of the resurrection, so runs the theory and it is added that what modern man needs is a demythologising of this myth. Thus the gospel of salvation ceases to be a supernatural message and is explicable entirely in terms of natural experiences. The process does not stop here. It is not long before God Himself has been shorn of His supernatural characteristics. For example, in the book "Honest to God", we are told that we are to think of God as a supernatural above nature; He is to be thought of simply as the ground of our being.

Not surprisingly, the activity of prayer as it has always been understood, becomes meaningless, for prayer is directed to a supernatural God. So too, the hope of life after death falls to the ground. This is a hope which rises above the natural events and bases itself on the power of a

supernatural God. But the process does not stop here; the concept of God is not only shorn of its supernaturalism but in fact it is jettisoned entirely in the 'God is Dead' school, the leaders of which say that God is a meaningless word. And so it is if there is nothing above nature, for that which is within nature is open to our inspection and we know it contains nothing deserving the name 'God'.

But the process does not stop here. The denial of the supernatural in religion quickly leads to a change in traditional Christian morality. The concept of righteousness is basically a supernatural concept depending for its basis on a supernatural standard and a supernatural law giver and judge. It is not surprising therefore that in a good deal of modern ethical thought righteousness plays no part and its place is occupied exclusively by the virtue of love. Love, however, is not a primary virtue; it depends on righteous-

ness for its purity, otherwise it merely sinks down to a sentimental condoning of things.

For example, God's Word clearly forbids pre-marital intercourse and homosexuality, to give two illustrations from discussions that are going on in the daily papers at present. This is because God is concerned with right relationships, not merely with relationships. It is only when relationships are right that love can be exercised and can play its part in determining what our actions should be. This breakdown in supernatural Christianity is seen very clearly in the confused thinking of so many Christians about Vietnam. This week I received a document through the post signed by some eminent clergy which condemns with equal condemnation the United States (and by inference, Australia) and the North Vietnamese. It makes no attempt to discern where righteousness lies in the problem (and it is a difficult problem) but begins with the prominent heading

"They are our brothers whom we kill". Of course, no Christian denies for a moment that it is our brothers whom we kill in Vietnam, any more than it is our brothers whom we imprison in Grafton or in Goulburn gaols. We think it right to do this and wrong to neglect to take this sort of action. The Nazis were also equally our brothers. Brotherhood is a beautiful truth; it should make our actions more serious and unselfish and ourselves tender-hearted. But it is not in itself a directive as to how we ought to act, as the document appears to think it is. First we must establish what our obligations are towards righteousness. If we fail to do this and simply allow our actions to be dictated by an undifferentiating, so-called love, we will find that our actions have departed very far from those of God as revealed in His supernatural revelation in Scripture.

The document describes itself as issued by the International Committee of Conscience

on Vietnam (Australian Branch). This phraseology again reveals the failure to understand the supernatural character of Christian morals. Conscience is a natural faculty, and in itself is no guide to truth. The Scottish Reformer John Knox was right when he answered Queen Mary of Scotland who had appealed to her conscience, that she should educate her conscience; and we educate our consciences by taking note of the revealed standards of God's Word. Here we will find that God has a passion for righteousness. He will judge the world in righteousness through Jesus Christ and as proof of this He has raised Him from the dead (Acts 17:31). This is a declaration of supernatural action of a supernatural God according to standards which He has declared in His supernatural Word. This is the impregnable rock. Love is an attitude which we must always have towards everyone; for all are our brothers; but it does not by itself determine what our actions should be in any

particular circumstance. This is determined by righteousness and justice. Love must be based on righteousness and this in turn must be based on the mind of the righteous judge of all. If we are to restore health to our ethical thinking we must recover a passion for righteousness. We must return to authentic Christianity which is based four square on the graciousness of a supernatural God reaching down to where we are. Who in His initiating word, breaking in on our ears with 'Thus saith the Lord', has given us a supernatural revelation and knowledge of Himself. He has come to where we are, to restore us to our supernatural destiny of fellowship with Him for ever, which we may begin to experience immediately by acknowledging Jesus of Nazareth as our supernatural Lord.

Christianity is a supernatural religion, given by a supernatural God through a supernatural revelation. If we begin to disbelieve in the supernatural character of the

Bible and its infallibility,
the process will not be long
before we have lost all the
distinctive character of Christ-
ianity, both in belief and in
morals.

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13 August 1967