

Should Denominational Beliefs Impose Limitations on Religious Teachers.

By Austen K. deBlois, Ph. D., LL. D., President of Shurtleff College. Delivered before the National Baptist Congress, Chicago, November 17, 1897.

Religious teaching is not simply the teaching of religion. All teaching is religious which conforms to religious ideals. These are as high as heaven and as deep as the human heart, for religion asserts the kinship between the finite and the infinite. In its earliest forms it is the consciousness within the soul of man of God or of a Superior Power. In later developments the religious man is one who is conscious of his personal relations with God. The Christian religion alone is a true world-religion. It presents a realized ideal in the person of Jesus Christ, the Divine man. Through this mediator it decrees fellowship with God, and fellowship with humanity, and makes possible, by the fullness of this fellowship, through a practical righteousness, the attainment of the ideal life in Christ. Thus the general place and function of the religious teacher in this Christian land should not be far to seek. Whether his duties lie within the precincts of a theological seminary or in the less professional atmosphere of the College or secondary school, his teaching must be illumined and transfigured by the light that shines from the Cross. Our religious teaching is Christian. It is Christocentric because Christian. It is Biblical, scientific, rational, because it studies the larger Christ in Revelation, in nature, in history. It is subjective, personal and predominantly spiritual, because its source is a personal Being, whose measureless life is its initiative and pervasive principle. It is ethical, but more than this, because energized and controlled by a vital and vitalizing power. In relation to the student this teaching is both doctrinal and practical. It toils to secure a broad and intelligent comprehension of Christ and Christianity. But it finds no resting place, it utterly fails in its mission, if it makes no appeal to the heart and conscience. It finds its key-note in the emphasis of the supreme reality of spiritual experience, and the necessity for Christ-inspired character and conduct in the life of the individual.

The vast majority of our religious teachers are connected with or another of the many denominations into which the Kingdom of Jesus Christ upon earth is divided. The denominations are scattered fragments of a single Faith. Each seeks to embody in a definite creed the principles of the Christian Religion. Where the spirits of men are unfettered, and possessed by the passion for truth, these class-divisions are inevitable. Each branch that strives upward from the parent trunk to the blue heavens, graceful and strong and massed with rare foliage, is an expression, more or less perfect, of the life that gives beauty and vigor to the tree. Religion is one. Its purpose is to unveil God. It seeks to bring the human spirit under the absolute sovereignty of the Divine Spirit, to teach the heavenly way. But in this high endeavor there cannot be a complete uniformity in method or in attitude. Hence denominations arise, and the religious life finds its expression in certain distinctive opinions and beliefs. When the life is most spontaneous the distinctions are most numerous. They multiply during epochs of free inquiry. More or less logically connected with systems they are held by classes or denominations of people. The classes subdivide again even on questions which are seemingly characteristic of the class, as was the case at last evening's session of this congress. In the final analysis the differentiation is infinite, for no two men believe exactly the same things.

I. The question of limitation of the teaching of religious truth by denominational beliefs depends largely upon the character of the relations between two factors in the problem:—What have they in common? How do they differ?

1. They alike glorify Truth. Religious teaching recognizes the Truth as personal. It proceeds from Christ who is Truth, as the point of departure, and returns always to him as guide and authority. Denominational beliefs are congeries of truths with admixture of errors, gained laboriously through a study of the words of Christ. They are an attempt to seize upon Truth and make it external. Any system of denominational beliefs is necessarily an incomplete representation. Denominations have been built upon isolated proof-texts. Denominations have subdivided themselves in quarrels over words and phrases in the New Testament Scriptures. On the other hand denominations doubtless exist which approximate the Truth very closely. In some measure at least they all recognize the supreme value of Truth.

2. Again, the Author of Christianity seeks the salvation of the world, the spiritual union of all mankind in a sacred fellowship of faith and hope and life. The stream of spiritual life which rises at the throne of God flows onward through all lands and downward through the ages. The Christ life will be the universal life. It is from God who is one, and to God who is one. Though Christianity is many sided it is single in its essence. The Christ is One, the doctrines are few and world-embracing, the ordinances are few and significant, the church is one in conception and plan, the aim of all Christ-directed effort is one. By emphasis of the inner and necessary

unity of the Christian religion, religious teaching seeks to realize the prayer of Jesus of Nazareth "that they all may be one, as thou Father art in me and I in thee, that they may be one in us." Denominationalism implies both unity and diversity. A denomination is "a body of Christians united by a common faith and form of worship and discipline." When denominations have sought by any means to compel belief, to crush the man of alien creed, to uproot heresy by burning Christian brethren, then a vigorous and positive denominationalism has degenerated into unwholesome and bitter sectarianism. The fanatical rage of the bigot, the schismatic, the proselyter; is productive only of disunion and disaster. No tyranny of force can rid the world of denominational differences.

3. The idea of freedom is everywhere present in the teachings of Jesus. Hegel has said that "religion is or ought to be perfect freedom"—Christ's statement is, "I am the Truth,—Ye shall know the Truth—The Truth shall make you free." Religious freedom consists in the emancipation of the spirit from all limitations, save that which the law of love in Christ Jesus imposes. The freedom which cuts loose from this law is rebellion, and ends in self-destruction. Denominations approximate freedom in so far as they approach Christ, and the pure word of His gospel. If they glory in elaborate politics, and ecclesiastical forms, and lengthy rituals, if they find their source of authority in the dogmatic teaching of a traditional church, they foster the worst form of servitude, the slavery of conscience.

4. There is also harmony in certain fundamental doctrinal principles, which religious teaching respects, and all or nearly all of the denominations acknowledge. How vast is this territory of common ownership! How rich its soil! How abundant its fruitage! Radiating from the life of Jesus Christ, true son of God, leal brother of man, these truths discover to us the Personal God, whom all worship, the Trinity in Unity, the sin of man, the redemption wrought through Christ, the Holy Spirit dwelling in the heart of the redeemed, the life immortal. In the clear light of these undying and catholic truths all the world may live rejoicing and die triumphant.

II. Thus the ideals and principles of religious truth and of denominational belief are not wholly diverse. There are certain distinctions which require to be noticed.

1. The habit of religion is to exalt the spiritual being; in the denominations the sum of sound doctrine is usually the object of intense regard. Here it is the form, there the content. If religion is the soul, denominational beliefs are the body through which the soul speaks. The body is never the perfect instrument of the soul, nor denominational beliefs of the religious life. Without the spirit the body is dead, but what do we know of the spirit apart from the body? Again, the whole force of religious truth is solidly set against class distinctions; while denominationalism by its very name must recognize and bear a part in such distinctions. Again, the criterion of denominational beliefs which is most frequently urged is conformity to a standard of objective truth. The undeviating criterion of the Christianity of Christ is a subjective or spiritual life. Still further, while denominations came into being by the wisdom of man the religion of Jesus was born in the bosom of the Almighty God, the everlasting Father. God is not a source of confusion, but of order. When men have fully interpreted the Divine plan, when they are wholly responsive to the Divine life, denominationalism will have no further reason for existence, or, rather, there will be but one denomination or class of Christians. There will be "one fold and one shepherd."

III. In view of these general relations of agreement and difference shall denominational beliefs limit the religious teacher? The strenuous advocates of sectarian peculiarities have been active in every age, in controlling religious teachings in the interest of their cherished creeds. When they condescend to plead or argue their cries are those of warning, of zeal, or of devotion. They emphasize the limits which prudence suggests; which loyalty demands; which love inspires.

1. The limitation in the interest of prudence cannot for an instant be sustained. Religious teaching is the teaching of Truth. Can it ever be right to veil truth for policy's sake or for prudence sake? Can truth be harmful or shameful or hideous in its mien, that it should be hidden or suppressed? If a fact of church history clash with certain denominational beliefs or practices, shall it be screened and covered up by the religious teacher, out of prudential regard for denominational interests? The most erratic flight of the imagination cannot picture Jesus Christ either counselling or countenancing such a restriction. Not a divine wisdom but only a demonic craftiness could suggest it. It is right that men should be cautious as well as free. They should hesitate to proclaim a newly discovered or rediscovered fact, until they are sure of its certitude. Then duty commands its utterance! Until then they are held not by denominational beliefs, but by honor, by love of truth, by fear of perpetuating error.

2. Is it right that loyalty to denominational principles should impose limitations? Prejudice is sometimes mistaken for loyalty. There are fundamental principles of denominational life, and principles which are important

though not fundamental. Prejudice accepts and battles for all with equal ardor, whether they concern the form only, or the substance as well. If party passion drive and govern, if political views limit broad citizenship, unworthy men step in to rule the greatest city in our nation. Party prejudice, whether in Church or state, is blind and indiscriminating. Loyalty discriminates. Loyalty discovers the essentials and stands by them in the faith that conquers. Loyalty subordinates the lesser principle to the higher, and crucifies prejudice that Truth, in whose right it is to reign, wear her crown, and wear the royal purple. If the denominational belief accord with the truth of religion, the loyal teacher will reverence and exalt it, as a part of the sum of religious knowledge. Here there is perfect harmony. The denominational belief imposes no restriction. If the denominational belief be found to conflict with some religious truth, the loyal teacher ceases to hold that specific belief. The greater claim of truth commands his loyalty. Thus religious truth undermines sectarianism and all false loyalty.

3. Love for the church or for the cause of Christ may be advanced as a good and sufficient reason for limitation. The teacher is a member of a denomination. He serves Christ after a special fashion. He holds that the doctrines of a certain class of Christians are in fuller accord with the teachings of Christ than those of any other class. He must define and justify his position. Duty and love alike constrain him. It is true that the teacher may often find it necessary to state the reasons for the maintenance of particular beliefs, to trace the sources of their strength, and to explain their relations to the general principles of the Christian system. He should support and defend the denominational principles to which he adheres. But exaggeration of denominational differences, and undue emphasis of distinctive tenets spring not from love of the church but from devotion to a sect, not from love of Christ, but from selfishness. Love "vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up."

IV. Shall religious teaching be unfettered, then, or shall it be hedged about with arbitrary restrictions? Shall the part govern the whole, or the whole the part? Shall the body dictate to the soul, or the soul to the body? Shall the lips direct the heart, or the heart speak with the lips? Did Christ come to establish religious truth or denominational beliefs? Which is greater and which shall rule? Religion feeds upon ideas. It has its soul and substance in certain imperishable truths. These are its life, its vigor, its glory. Parties, politics, sects, classes, are convenient and useful, but not essential, in the evolution and perpetuation of these root-ideas. When they assume authority, and bind the green withes of compulsion about the free limbs of the Christian thinker, their office must be defined by him whom they would fetter, in the name of religious liberty. If the teacher in his thinking has passed beyond his brethren in the same denomination; if his beliefs—few or many—accord no longer with theirs, let him resign his place in the school where he gives his instruction, let him leave the denomination entirely, if need be, but let him never perjure himself by allowing his teaching to be confined by beliefs which he has outgrown, or to which he can no longer subscribe.

It is true that there is an unconscious limitation which it is impossible to avoid. Three tourists view the city of Edinburgh, one from Calton Hill, one from Arthur's seat, one from the ramparts of the castle. Each sees the city, the gardens, the monuments, St. Giles, old High Street, Holyrood. Each sees the same yet a different picture. The point of view determines the character of the scene revealed directly to the eye. It determines as well the description treasured by the imagination, and told by the tongue at the distance of a thousand miles, or after the lapse of a dozen years. So the point of view must influence the attitude of the thinker and limit his teaching of religious truth. This natural bias is universal. But it so characterizes the thoughts and activities of all men that we allow for its presence, and thus escape its dangers. Apart from this natural and necessary restriction there should be absolutely no limitation whatever of religious teaching by denominational beliefs.

1. The character of religious truth proclaims the fact. It is stable amid all change. It is fundamental. It is authoritative. It touches the soul of things. Limitations which the body puts upon the soul are cramping and repressive and evil. They fetter its life and darken its glory. So far as the body interprets the soul its function is high and holy. In such responsive interpretation the radiant beauty of the soul appears. So, the tendency in the denomination which is farthest from the possession of Christian truth in its purity, is the denomination in which the tendency to restrict religious teaching in the interest of particular sectarian belief is the greatest. The denomination which most fully follows the Christ and the words of Christ will realize most perfectly the ideal of all religious teaching, and will therefore have the least occasion for restraining the expression of religious truth.

2. Consider, then, as an additional consideration of the thesis, the purpose of religious teaching. This, for the

Christian, is to expound his Evangelium, to be respected, to dogmas, although bring into clear the teacher neg exalted ends, hiefs? but to le If, again, his views of truth lief will have itself be dimme are dangerous to form and deliv Let him that te with the unde and this alone,

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