

Messenger and Visitor

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TRUTH AND THEORY.

Human theories in regard to truth are not unimportant, but they are much less important than the truth itself. Correct and systematized knowledge is never to be undervalued. This is obviously true in reference to the facts and phenomena of the physical world. If one has a correct knowledge of these facts and phenomena and a true theory of their various relations, he is in a much better position to make a practical use of them than he would be if his knowledge were defective and his theory erroneous. At the same time the facts and phenomena of nature are of far greater importance to the world than any theory concerning them, and nature bestows her bounty liberally upon men in spite of their inability to explain her phenomena and their failure to construct correct theories of her modes of operation. Who can clearly explain, even in this scientific age, the nature of electricity? But our ignorance in regard to the nature of this substance—if substance it is—does not prevent our reaping advantage from the service which in a multitude of ways it can be made to yield. The phenomena of light were for a long time explained in accordance with the corpuscular theory. Now the wave theory, which is very different, is universally accepted in the scientific world, and the old theory is discarded as erroneous. No doubt but that this advance in science has been attended by large practical gains, but light itself has continued to be the same, whatever the learned have thought or taught concerning its nature. It is well indeed that men should carefully observe and study and endeavor with utmost diligence to learn the secrets of nature and to construct their theories in accordance with the facts. But we may rejoice that the course of nature does not wait upon the understanding of man. Long before there was any human theory concerning light, the light shone, filling the world with beauty, nourishing life in plant and animal and making all the work of man possible under the sun. While men with more or less success have studied this glorious mystery of the physical world and endeavored to frame a theory to account for its phenomena, the light has continued to shine on. And however true or however mistaken human theories as to the nature of light may be, the light itself in its nature and its qualities will not be affected by what men may think or say concerning it.

The principle we have noted has its application in the spiritual as well as in the physical realm of things. We shall do wisely not to identify our theories of truth with the truth itself. The Infinite Mind has not needed to take counsel with man, and the Almighty has not seen fit that His activities should wait upon man's powers of comprehension. Our understanding of God's work may be more or less correct or more or less erroneous, it is sure to be imperfect. But our comprehension is not the measure of the truth. Human theories about God and His work do not alter the eternal fact. God is forever and forever the same and His truth unchangeable. This principle has its application in reference to the Bible. If the Bible is, as we believe the word of God in a sense in which no other book or literature is, then nothing can alter that fact, and no human theory to the contrary can rob the Bible of its power to enlighten and bless the world. If, on the other hand there are human and fallible elements in the Bible, the assertion that it is all divine and absolutely infallible, however vehemently and constantly reiterated, will never make it so. What the Bible is it is, and all the opinions which men may hold or teach concerning it cannot change its essential character. It is true that the theories of Biblical scholars and interpreters are likely, according to the measure of truth or error they embody, to illumine or darken the minds of those who receive their teachings. Hence the vast responsibility of those who assume to teach, to seek with earnest, open mind to shape their theories in accordance with the truth, but the theory of the exegete or the theologian cannot make the Bible other than it is, nor can it permanently prevent it being known and valued according to its own true character.

It is doubtless right that men should diligently study to understand the methods of God's revelation of Himself in the world, and just as honest and diligent study in the field of physical phenomena, though it may involve putting forth and the abandonment of many untenable theories, is nevertheless from decade to decade and from century to century repaid with a constant enlargement of the realm of established science, so in the sphere of religious truth we may confidently expect that the labors of earnest and reverent students will not go unrewarded. We cannot doubt that

"Through the ages an increasing purpose runs
And the thoughts of men are widened with the process
of the suns."

We cannot prevent men seeking to enlarge the horizon of human knowledge, and it would be very foolish for us to do so if we could. The men who in the light of all attainable facts are studying the works and the word of God are the servants of God and of humanity. We need not fear that the outcome of their work will be to obscure the truth or to bring man's mind into bondage to error. God's purposes toward the world are good, and they are not to be thwarted by either the ignorance or the perversity of men.

Certainly the seeker after truth may make mistakes. Even the most careful student, with the sincerest desire to arrive at truth, is not infallible. This consideration should deliver the scholar from arrogant dogmatism, and it justifies great caution in the acceptance of new theories. But we may feel sure that there is no reason to dread the ultimate outcome of the study of God's Word by careful, reverent, Christian scholarship. For it is evident, as we have said, that the truth abides forever the same, however human theories concerning it may change, and after all it is the truth, and not the theory, that is of supreme importance. And may we not also take comfort in the assurance that the aim of Christian scholarship is the truth? Doubtless there is a scholarship which is not Christian, against which we do well to be on our guard. But there are many Christian scholars who feel that in the name of truth and the interests of humanity they dare not decline the challenge to examine facts and theories advanced in reference to subjects of traditional belief. Those men are controlled by the free spirit of Christ. They are honest, reverent Christians. Their aim is not to pervert, but to discern and to declare the truth, and we cannot believe that the result will be that they and all who listen to them will be abandoned of God to wander in labyrinths of error and unbelief. Of course they may make mistakes, but men who are sincerely endeavoring to learn God's truth and do His will, will not be permitted to go on to lead others very far astray.

THE KING'S MESSENGERS.

One of the important thoughts suggested by the Bible lesson for the week is the willingness of Jesus to employ men as the heralds of his gospel and as the messengers of his grace. These seventy men probably had a very imperfect understanding of the purpose of their Lord's coming into the world. Their intellectual and spiritual equipment doubtless lacked much of being all that was to be desired in those who should proclaim the gospel of Christ. But Jesus seems to have thought more of the importance of the work to be done than the absolute fitness of the instrument employed for it. The fields were white to the harvest, and for everyone who could wield a sickle, however unskillfully, there was a work to do. If there was much that was beyond the ability of these men, there was important service which they could render, and the Lord called them, as he calls us all, to a ministry in accordance with each servant's ability. These men were not yet able to preach redemption in the name of a risen Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit. But they believe in their Master so far as they understood him; their faith in him, it appears, was sufficient to enable them to work miracles in his name; they were persuaded that he was from God, that through him the Kingdom of God should come and that the doctrines which he taught and the works which he performed were of the utmost importance to the people. It was to proclaim the truth so far as they knew it that these men were sent forth, and the service which they rendered in thus preparing the way of their Lord in the cities and villages which he himself was about to visit was not unimportant. The work of evangelization will be carried on most successfully when every believer declares with simple, serious conviction what Christ and his gospel have become to him in his own experience and accompanies his testimony with such work for the relief of the sufferings of humanity as may be possible.

The charge which Jesus gives to Seventy as he sends them forth upon their mission suggests that the service to which the Christian preacher is called is one of unselfishness and self-denial. There is no promise of wealth or ease or luxury. The servant is to find his satisfaction and his reward in the work to which his Master calls him and in its results. The Lord's servant is not to be burdened or impeded with superfluities, nor weakened by luxuries. The business on which he is sent is one that demands singleness of purpose and strenuous endeavor. While his great aim is to bring help to humanity through the power of the gospel and while he is not to be uninterested in

all that truly pertains to human welfare, he must avoid wasting his time and strength in social formalities which have no valuable result. He will not despise human sympathy and fellowship—the Master himself did not—but he will be dependent upon them. He will know how to to encounter adverse as well as favorable receptions and will not be dismayed in the presence of opposition. He is to be gentle yet courageous, simple yet wise, combining the wisdom of the serpent with the harmlessness of the dove.

The servant of Christ is never to forget that he is a servant. It is not his own business that he is to transact or his own name and fame that he is to exalt. His presence in any city or house in itself signifies little. What gives to him and to his mission significance is that he is sent to announce the coming of his Lord. The seventy whom Jesus sent forth announced the coming of their Master as about to take place, but the servant of Christ today preaches that gospel in the perfect and the present tense—the Lord has come, the Lord is here. And he who makes this fact of supreme significance most clear to those to whom his message is delivered best serves his Lord and the cause of human redemption.

Then, again, the servant of Jesus is not to forget that he is the servant of the Lord of lords and King of kings. The message with which he is charged is not of such a character that men may hear or forbear, receive or reject it with impunity. To those to whom it is delivered "the Kingdom of God is come nigh," and whether for boundless blessing or for intolerable condemnation the attitude of those who hear determines. What the Christian minister needs especially to realize is the greatness of his high calling as an ambassador of Christ and the measureless importance of the issues which hang upon the acceptance or the rejection of the message with which he is charged. The gospel which he preaches is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes, and it is the judgment of God unto condemnation to everyone who rejects. Neither communities nor individual men and women are saved because of position and the reputations they enjoy. Their salvation or their condemnation depends upon their attitude to the gospel of Christ.

Editorial Notes

—The American Baptist Home Missionary Society has had a prosperous year, its receipts having met all obligations and effected a reduction of \$6,000 in last year's debt. The debt now stands at \$22,000.

—We suppose that most of our readers would understand that the article which appeared on our fifth page last week was from the pen of Rev. H. Waring, although by a rather inexcusable typographical blunder, the article appeared on one page and the writer's signature on another. A second article from Mr. Waring was received too late for insertion in this week's issue.

—It was noted in these columns some months ago that charges of holding and teaching doctrine not in harmony with the accepted standards of the Methodist Church had been preferred against Dr. Borden P. Bowne of Boston University. These charges were laid before the committee of the New York Eist Conference of the Methodist Church at its recent session, and after what is said to have been a full investigation, the charges were dismissed. The result of the trial, we believe, gives very general satisfaction, not only in the Methodist Church but in other evangelical bodies. The feeling was pretty generally shared by those who were acquainted with Dr. Bowne and his published works that he was not a man who could justly be condemned as a heretic.

—The hope of the temperance people of Ontario for the enactment of any thorough-going reform legislation during the present session of the legislature has been disappointed. Premier Ross declared in favor of a law prohibiting the bar and placing the retail traffic, so far as such traffic should be permitted, under Government control. Such a measure, it is believed, would have obtained the approval of the temperance people, as, at least, a long step in the right direction. But Mr. Ross's party would not follow his lead, and the proposed legislation is delayed, perhaps indefinitely. In reply to a delegation of Methodist and Baptist ministers Mr. Ross has said: "If the Government is unable to give the measure desired this session it will be our duty to consider what means are available for further action." This is not very definite language, but those who are friendly to the Premier and believe in his honesty of purpose are hoping that it means that he will take such action as in his judgment is but adapted to secure the reform desired.

—The Canadian Baptist quotes from the *Weekly Sun* of Toronto the following appreciative reference to the Baptists from the pen of Professor Goldwin Smith: "Mr. Saunders' history of the Baptists of the Maritime Provinces reminds us of the gratitude due to the only great Christian Church, or the only one save the Quakers, which has scrupulously lived up to the principle that the Kingdom is not of this world. Plain as the principle seems to be, it has been miserably slighted, and consequences of the disregard of it have been the blackest pages of religious