

The Sovereignty of God and Human Activity.

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ONE of the outstanding features of the present situation in this country is undoubtedly the apparent elimination of God. Not that all men everywhere have entirely banished God from the world which He has created, but rather that He has been so persistently ignored in many quarters that He has ceased to count as the supreme factor in life. It is, of course, perfectly true that in more than one direction, lip-service is paid to Him even by such men as Hitler, though it is hardly necessary to point out that his idea of God lacks the content that marks the Christian conception. But to the vast majority of people to-day God has ceased to be either a Person or even a directive power.

Now there are undoubtedly a number of causes which have combined to produce this unsatisfactory state of mind but one at least, judging by much that is said and written to-day, is the apparent irrelevance of God to the life of man. Men do not see where He really comes into things, rather He appears to be an excrescence to modern life. And this attitude, widely diffused as it is, is in turn the product of other forces which have made it easier for man to "get on without God" as it is often put. For a whole generation and more, men have increasingly diverted their attention to science and, more recently, to economics than to Religion. And, in spite of the caution and hesitation that marked many of the utterances of the greatest scientists they assumed all too glibly that science had displaced religion as the guide of life. Other results followed. The Bible was discarded for the scientific text-book. History, instead of being the sphere of God's activity, was the record of the working out on the grand scale of impersonal forces. Man's redemption must be looked for in the economic sphere; and improved houses were of far greater importance than improved characters. Mechanization became more important than spiritualization; and the machine became the symbol of man's progress and emancipation. That, very briefly, was the situation when war, with all its inevitable spiritual, moral and intellectual disturbances, broke into life.

There is, however, one other factor which must be noted if only because of its disastrous repercussions in the intellectual sphere. Decline in the study of the Bible has long been a stock subject of clerical bemoanings. Its language, so familiar to our fore-fathers, sounds strange to modern man and, like the older terminology of religion, makes no appeal to him. As Prof. Hodges has so well pointed out, many religious people are almost totally unaware of the decisive cleavage between the religious person and the ordinary man of to-day. In many respects they are poles apart. As he puts it, Religion "appears as a voice from another and unusual world, talking in an unintelligible

language about things remote from reality." A direct consequence both of this cleavage and the entire neglect of Biblical knowledge is a terribly vague and indeterminate intellectual attitude. "Some think God exists, some think not, some think it is impossible to tell, and the impression grows that it does not matter." Could anything be much less satisfactory as a basis for an attempt to "vindicate the ways of God to man"? Yet the attempt must be made by the Church to-day lest the charge of utter irrelevance be regarded as established by the thought of our time.

If, then, such is one of the primary tasks confronting the Church to-day it is obvious that one essential preliminary to any re-establishment of the thought of God in the mind of man is to convince him that the Almighty Creator of the universe is not merely a "first cause" or "the supreme mind," but a divine personality existing from all eternity, the ever present author and sustainer of the world, of "infinite power, wisdom and goodness".¹ Such a conception of God must be regarded as axiomatic if only because personality is the highest category that we know. Right from the very beginning of Biblical history God reveals Himself as personal. "I Am that I Am." But that is only a preliminary though a vital one. Most people, if they have any religious ideas at all, get as far as that. But vagueness is the enemy of true religion. The idea of God must be amplified if it is to be a controlling force in a man's life. And that is the great need of the present time. It is not the mere existence of a personal God that needs to be stressed, but the attributes of God. Man must at all costs, if God is to mean anything to him at all, be conscious of God's infinite wisdom and power. To proclaim a God of limited power or range of action, apart from any self-imposed limitations of His own Being, would not be to proclaim One whom man could regard as his strength and stay in a world of strong temptation and besetting sin. The priority and all-sufficiency of God must be the starting point of any adequate thought about Him. And even then we are compelled to proceed to a further conception, namely that the all-sufficient God is not merely passive but active. A conception of God which stressed His passivity, regarding Him as spectator rather than participant, would be very largely to banish Him from His universe. No conception of God which regarded Him as the detached observer of His own creative achievements, unconcerned with any further development of them, is tolerable as a basis for belief. Its immediate as well as its ultimate effect would be to produce in man a feeling of apathy and despair. And as a matter of fact, that is precisely the attitude of vast numbers of people to-day to whom God has become the Great Unreality. It is the real basis of that profound indifference to religion which we all so frequently deplore.

When, then, we speak of God to the modern man we must put the stress first upon His infinite wisdom and power. To proclaim a God of limited resources and range of action, apart as we have said from any necessary limitations of his own being, would not be to proclaim One whom man must regard as his Saviour and Redeemer. He would be suspect on the grounds of capacity to the vast majority. In fact, right from the earliest times, God's power to act according to His own will has always been assumed. "In the beginning God created. . . ." Obviously,

therefore, He had the power from all eternity to express His mercy by creative acts. There was no compulsion to create. He did it simply because He willed to do it. And so the Christian Church prefaces its declaration of faith by a clear assertion of God's power. "I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible." That is clear and categorical, the necessary postulate of any belief that is going to be at all helpful to man. Yet again we cannot be satisfied with a mere exhibition of power unless we can be sure that it is always and in all circumstances an infinite power controlled by infinite wisdom and expressing itself in a watchful and all-seeing Providence. For the moment we can ignore the implications of the word Father, vital as they undoubtedly are. The point we are emphasizing is that the omnipotent God, One, that is, who contains in His own nature all resources necessary for the expression of His own will, acts, and can only act, in accordance with His own nature which is perfect goodness and perfect wisdom. Thus creation was not only a pure and spontaneous act of God, but it was capable of being described as "very good." Well could the Seer exclaim, "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power, for Thou hast created all things and for Thy pleasure they are and were created." ²

Now in stressing the goodness of God in creation we have reached the point when we can no longer refuse to use definite Christian categories. We ignored above the term which most concisely and effectively describes that character of God which it was the privilege of Christianity to exhibit to the world. "God is love," and in that briefest of phrases we find ourselves confronted with the highest conception imaginable of divine personality. It is in the light of that fuller and final revelation of God's nature that we must consider all His acts in the world which He has created and sustains. But the conception of God has a long history behind it. It is the great theme of the Old Testament where the sovereignty of God is already exhibited on the plane of history. "Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel . . . I have made the earth . . . by My great power and by My outstretched arm; and I give it unto whom it seemeth right unto Me" ³ "For, lo, I will stir up and cause to come up against Babylon an assembly of great nations from the north country. . . ." ⁴ "I will render unto Babylon and to all the inhabitants of Chaldea all their evil that they have done in Zion in your sight, saith the Lord." ⁵ Such passages, and many more could be quoted, suffice to show that the idea of God active in human history, is explicit throughout the Old Testament. It is true, of course, that the Hebrew people had in the early stages of their history a much narrower and more restricted conception of God. But He was still active, even if the sphere of His activity were limited to Israel and Judah. Later, as the quotations show, a much wider idea of divine intervention holds the field. Yet it is all the time an activity governed by righteous principles. As Jeremiah in a splendid passage, very seldom noted, says: Thus saith the Lord, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom . . . But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth Me, that I am the Lord which exercise lovingkindness, judgment and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the Lord." ⁶ And this activity of a righteous

God showed itself most clearly in those judgments which were always regarded as expressions of the will of the Almighty.

And here was one of the great stumbling blocks of the Hebrew people. That God should judge His own people and visit upon them their iniquities seemed a monstrous perversion of His goodness and care. It was one of the hardest tests of the prophets to instil into their dull and prejudiced minds what was inevitably involved in God's intervention in history. "Shall I not visit for these things? saith the Lord: shalt not My soul be avenged on such a nation as this?"⁷ But this was only part of a wider problem which persistently perplexes certain Old Testament writers and finds such poignant expression in some of the Psalms. This is the old problem of the suffering of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked. Yet from whatever standpoint they write, the activity of God in history was assumed. And this activity was to find its highest and most complete expression in the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. This event is the culmination, though of course, not the end, of God's active intervention in history. Here God is indeed breaking into history and shattering the view that He is not "afflicted in the afflictions of His people." For a God who interferes in history to the extent of Incarnation cannot by any stretch of the imagination be regarded as being outside the historical process in the sense of entire detachment. As Dr. Whale rightly says: "Unless the eternal be somehow given to man in history, that is, in the only way which man can understand, God must remain for ever the unknown God."⁸ And in this "givenness" God's eternal Son not merely "came down from heaven and was incarnate" but was "crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate." The Cross and all that was involved in it indicated that God refused to leave the problem where it was. Hitherto man had viewed God's intervention very largely as indicative of His wrath upon the essential sinfulness of man. The great lesson of the historic drama of the Old Testament is that man in his self-centredness tends always to regard "himself, his nations, his cultures, his civilizations, to be divine. Sin is thus the unwillingness of man to acknowledge his creatureliness and dependence upon God and his effort to make his own life independent and secure."⁹ And the inevitable answer to all this is the judgment of God by which His righteousness is vindicated before the world. The wrath of the holy God had to be "revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men." But that was only one aspect of the divine nature. The full range of His purpose is yet to be revealed. God was much more than the stern judge, still less a disinterested spectator of the world's sufferings. It was judgment but it was, as He was soon to show, judgment tempered by mercy. Already, even in Old Testament times, the idea of redemptive suffering had been adumbrated by the greatest of the prophets. The Cross, therefore, at once revealed the all embracing love of God for man. "God so loved the world that He gave. . . ."¹⁰ It was a decisive act of God. It was the supreme manifestation in history of God the Father vindicating the moral order of the universe in defiance of sinful man. God is here intervening in the most crucial fashion imaginable. And it all sprang from Love. "He bore our sins." Here was no selfish isolation from the sorrows and perplexities of human life. There

from the Cross with all its suffering and desolation springs the great hope of the world. The Cross as an exhibition of God's intervention in the life of man is crucial. "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself."¹¹ The Cross is, then, the supreme exhibition of love, and love is the greatest power in the world. Love can transform and recreate when the greatest physical force will fail and fail miserably. Force, as the writer of the Epistle to Diognetus long ago pointed out, is contrary to the purpose of God. Force compels, love wins. It can, as Dr. Quick has said, "by a mysterious alchemy peculiar to itself, bring good out of evil, make evil itself, in spite of itself, subserve the purposes of good."¹² And as he proceeds to point out the Cross is the supreme example of the greatest triumph of evil and at the same time the one event which has changed most lives from evil to good. Thus the Christian, as he surveys the problems and perplexities, the sufferings and disappointments of the world, must ever bear this conception of God in mind. It is vital for a true understanding of human life. It is the truest safeguard against either apathy or despair.

God, therefore, is active in history. He is active, that is, not only in the human soul but in the whole process of historic movement. God is immanent in His creation—guiding, sustaining and upholding; but He is also transcendent. He rules over all, His divine immanence is shown by the laws of nature which are the expression of His own immutable will. On these man can rely, for with God, "there is no variableness nor shadow caused by turning."¹³ His purposive will thus, finding expression in natural laws, gives permanence and stability to the whole natural order on which scientists can base their observations and calculations. But this reliance on the fixity of the laws governing the universe must not be taken to mean that they cannot be used to achieve the high purposes of God. It is not to be supposed that we can "at all times and in all places" understand the activities of God. And it would not be good for us if we did. We are to walk by faith rather than by knowledge. For, as Dr. Temple long ago pointed out, "If God in fact intervened on every occasion, or on many occasions, when apart from His action, the normal process of events would lead to a calamitous 'accident', it may be doubted if the spiritual side of human nature would ever be able to assert itself."¹⁴

Now this activity of God in history has one immediate important result. For it demonstrates, so far as the Christian is concerned, that there is no such thing as secular history. All history is the sphere in which God carries out His purposes in the world. For it is precisely in what we call secular history that we are enabled to see God at work in His own creative process. It is this fact which gives importance and significance to the events of history which might otherwise be deemed of no particular value. Any supposed dualism between secular and sacred history has no justification in fact. When applied to historical events it involves the dangerous implication that God is at work only in special eras or under special conditions or for the attainment of special and sometimes limited objectives. Such a view, of course, is inconsistent with the Christian doctrine of God. But this must not be taken to mean that all historic events, however trivial or insignificant, constitute in themselves a special revelation of God. It is the great events that reveal the activity of God, and these in

turn are but the apogee of long processes to the making of which the whole series of previous historic events contributed their share. The declaration of war in 1939 was an event for which a vast number of subordinate occurrences of all sorts and conditions prepared the way. But it is the culmination that counts. It is in this sense presumably that Dr. Whale's definition of history as "the selection and interpretation of facts" ¹⁵ must be taken.

Such considerations bring us to a further point of importance. What should be man's response to the activity of God? Is he but clay in the hands of the Father, the apathetic material on which the divine power continually acts? The answer to such questions raises problems for which in some cases no adequate solution can be found. It involves the question of man's freedom which is so often taken for granted without any thought of the problems which it presents. Yet on the surface man appears to be perfectly free to determine his own life. He showed his freedom supremely in the great crisis of the world's history when he crucified the Son of God. The whole of the teaching of the Bible pre-supposes man's capacity to make decisions. Yet on the other hand we know, as a matter of experience, that our minds and wills are often distorted and deflected by forces quite outside their control—by social influences, heredity, education, and so on. These all play an immensely important part if not a decisive one. But even so they cannot be said to rob man entirely of this freedom. We dare not say that freedom is a mirage, deluding man with the idea that he preserves freedom while all the time he is really an automaton. As a mere matter of fact, man has, and must have, a considerable measure of freedom, otherwise morality would be a sham. It is the primary condition of moral behaviour that man has the capacity to determine his actions in accordance with the principles which he acknowledges. Yet anyone who knows human nature, especially as he sees it in his own heart, is compelled to acknowledge that man always finds himself confronted by forces which seem all too often to be determinative of his conduct. The self-centred ego is not entirely free. It is all too conscious of a power which persists in nullifying his noblest aspirations. This was the experience of St. Paul. "For the good that I would I do not, but the evil which I would not that I do" ¹⁶ And who has not had a similar experience? And to experience it is to be acutely conscious of forces at war within one's self which all too often bring to nought one's fairest hopes and finest aspirations. For the trouble is, as Dr. Temple has shown us, "That we are self-centred, and no effort of the self can remove the self from the centre of its own endeavour." ¹⁷

From our standpoint, therefore, man cannot be said to enjoy real freedom. Rather he appears to be in the grip of a self-centred determinism which can only find emancipation in a spiritual context. In other words he needs deliverance from himself—his egotism, selfishness and pride. But it is just here that he realises his powerlessness. For in the language of the New Testament a man's will is vitiated by sin which "reigns in our mortal nature." And nothing is clearer in our experience than that we cannot save ourselves. It is the root heresy of our time that man supposes that he can achieve his own salvation. For to quote Dr. Temple again, "What is quite certain is that the self cannot by any effort of its own lift itself off its own self or centre and

resystematize itself about God as its centre. Such radical conversion must be the act of God. . . . It cannot be a process only of enlightenment. Nothing can suffice but a redemptive act."¹⁸ In other words to achieve freedom man needs conversion. He needs to be brought within the sphere of the grace of God in a special sense. The barriers of self-centredness must be broken down before the will can attain that "perfect freedom" which comes from the service of God instead of the service of self.

In what sense, therefore, may we contend that only by the grace of God does man attain his true freedom? But before any attempt can be made to answer this question, there is another preliminary one; What do we understand of grace? For grace is one of those words which are often used without much reflection upon their true meaning. Perhaps one of the best ways of defining grace is to describe it as the active beneficence of God. It is "God's goodwill towards us." It is His eternal goodness in process of continual action in the heart of man—the immanence of the transcendent God. It is emphatically a supernatural endowment. "For by grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God. Not of works lest any man should boast." Hence we can see at a glance man's position of humble dependence upon God as the recipient of His goodwill. This grace found supreme expression in the Cross of Christ¹⁹ whereby we are saved from the power of sin. For salvation is the achievement of God, not of man. It is God's great gift to us men. From the beginning to the end it is the act of God.

But this is only one, if the most important, aspect of the grace of God. For that beneficence is continually at work in the life of the redeemed. God's grace is still active in the souls of men. For "we stand either under the Grace, the favour of God, or under the Wrath, the dis-Grace of God."²⁰ Theologically, this activity of the grace of God, working ever in the hearts of men is called prevenient grace for its activity of necessity must precede any consequences in the way of repentance on the part of man. Yet grace must not be regarded as superseding the need of man's co-operation. Man must certainly "work out his own salvation," which at least means that he must not passively leave everything to God. On the contrary we are to be "fellow workers together with Christ" which means a measure of co-operation in the divine plan for our lives, though even so the true Christian will be conscious that his energy and power have a supernatural origin. "I live, yet no longer I, but Christ liveth in me." "By the grace of God I am what I am . . . I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me."²¹ No doubt in many respects the problem is one of those paradoxes which will remain unresolved so long as "we see through a glass darkly."²² The sovereignty of God and the inalienable freedom of man, as Dr. Farmer has written, presents an "antinomy which it is ever beyond our minds to resolve into a completely satisfying theoretical unity."²³

And so we are driven back again to the central event of all history, to that apparent tragedy from which has flowed the greatest hope of the world. It is precisely here, in what appears on the surface, to the "natural man",²⁴ the greatest defeat of goodness in the whole history

of man, that the Church grasps with the aid of faith the key to the world's greatest and most baffling problems. Out of the overshadowing darkness has "shined a great light." From man's greatest act of wickedness flows the world's redemption. Here is the supreme paradox of history, the greatest evil achieving the greatest good. Such is the amazing wisdom of the infinite God. And only in so far as we attempt to grasp something of this infinite wisdom can we expect even to begin to understand, still less to attempt to solve, the problems of God's historic action.

¹ *Article of Religion I.*

² Rev. iv. 11.

³ Jer. xxvii. 4, 5. ⁴ Jer. i. 9. ⁵ Jer. li. 24. ⁶ Jer. ix. 23, 24.

⁷ Jer. ix. 9. ⁸ Whale: *Christian Doctrine*, p. 59. ⁹ Niebuhr: *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. (Gifford Lectures) vol. I, page 148. *cf* Roms. I. 18.

¹⁰ Jo. iii. 16. ¹¹ II Cor. v. 19. ¹² Quick: *Christian Beliefs and Modern Questions* p. 38.

¹³ James. I. 17. ¹⁴ *Christus Veritas*: p. 197.

¹⁵ *op cit.* p. 60.

¹⁶ Rom. vii. 19. ¹⁷ *Nature, Man and God*. (Gifford Lectures). p. 243.

¹⁸ *op cit*: p. 397. ¹⁹ Dr. Hardman in *The Christian Doctrine of Grace*: prefers to speak of the Incarnation as the "supreme act in the operation of grace," but since our salvation and deliverance from the power of sin depends upon the Cross, it seems more correct to apply those words to the Crucifixion. See *op cit*: p. 98.

²⁰ Syngé: *St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians*. A Theological Commentary. p. 7.

²¹ I Cor. xv. 10. ²² I Cor. xiii. 12. ²³ *The World and God*: p. 256. ²⁴ I Cor. ii. 14.

Justification by Faith.

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WE live in a day when there is a fresh need to insist upon the fundamental truths of Christian faith, and none is of more importance than the fact of the righteousness of God. As in the days following the enlightenment the Reformers found a world ready to hear the proclamation of those truths which are based upon this conception, so now in a day of seeking a New Order (with all its discussion of social conditions) there must be put forward as fundamental the recovery of those conceptions which draw their inspiration from the conviction that the whole world can only be guided aright as the foundation of life is found in God Himself: and God is 'righteous in all His ways, and holy in all His works.' (Psalm cxlv. 17). But the distinctive message of the Reformation was that of declaring how man was brought into a new relationship with God and indeed 'accounted righteous by the merits of Christ alone.'

The Christian, then, is not merely a pardoned criminal, he is a righteous man, and this expresses in modern terms the foundation stone of the Reformation theology, and the secret of its power. Justification lies at the root of the Christian experience, not as the goal for Christian attainment. As Dr. J. G. Simpson has put it 'The distinction is not merely a matter of terms, but has an important bearing upon the Christian character. The provision of aids, however powerful,