

## CHAPTER 9

"In Christ's grand and simple creed, expressed in His plainest words, eternal life was the assured inheritance of those who loved God with all their hearts, who loved their neighbors as themselves, and who walked purely, humbly, and beneficently while on earth. In the Christian sects and churches of today, in their recognized formularies and elaborate creeds, all this is repudiated as infantine and obsolete; the official means and purchase-money of salvation are altogether changed; eternal life is reserved for those, and for those only, who accept, or profess, a string of metaphysical propositions conceived in a scholastic brain and put into scholastic phraseology."<sup>1</sup>

To anyone who aims at having clear thoughts and well-based beliefs, nothing is more helpful than adverse criticism. Hence the value of the words here quoted. They may be taken, moreover, as expressing the opinions of a large and important class by whom the writer, though no longer with us, may still be claimed as a champion and representative.

A preliminary question which presents itself is, Where are we to find this "grand and simple creed" thus commended to our acceptance? If, as the agnostic tells us, the Gospels are mere human records, what can be sillier than to appeal to them for the teaching of Christ! It was a conceit of ancient writers to put long speeches into the mouths of their heroes, and the discourses attributed to the Nazarene fall at once into the category of romance. But we are told that while the evangelists are not to be trusted when they record plain events of which they were eyewitnesses, like the miracles of Christ, they are to be believed implicitly when they profess to record *verbatim* His prolonged discourses! If the Gospels be Divinely inspired, agnosticism is sheer folly; if they be not inspired, our faith is sheer superstition.

The next thought which these words suggest is that if eternal life be indeed reserved for those whose character and conduct are marked by absolute perfection, the whole human race is doomed. Perfect love to God and man is a standard which excludes even the saintliest of saints, and common men may at once dismiss all hope of reaching it. And yet the author is right. It is thus and only thus that eternal life can be *inherited* by any child of Adam. What concerns us, then, is to inquire whether possibly some other road to blessing may be open to us. *Agnosticism* is Greek for ignorance. May we not hope that this particular agnostic is true to his name, and that Divine love goes far beyond what he seems ever to have realized or heard of?

The statements here challenged are important as showing how seriously the great truth of the Reformation is prejudiced by the very prominence assigned to it in our Protestant system of theology. That it should loom great in our estimation is but natural, having regard to the fierceness of the struggle to which we owe its recovery. And yet the dogma that justification is *by faith* is but a secondary truth, and ancillary to another of wider range and more transcendent moment. "For this cause it is on the principle of faith, that

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1 W. R. Greg's "Creed of Christendom."

it may be according to Grace."<sup>2</sup> GRACE is the characteristic truth of Christianity. According to the great doctrinal treatise of the New Testament, we are "justified by grace," "justified by faith," "justified by blood"--that is, by the death of Christ in its application to us, for such is the meaning of the sacrificial figure of which the word "blood" is the expression in the New Testament. Grace is the principle on which God justifies a sinner, faith is the principle on which the benefit is received, and the death of Christ is the ground on which alone all this is possible--we are "justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:24).

And they who are thus justified can urge no claim to the benefit on the ground either of merit or of promise. For if we could earn a title to it, there were no need of redemption; and if God had pledged Himself by covenant to grant it, there were no room for grace. Grace is sovereign, but it is free.

There are two alternative principles on which alone justification is now theoretically possible. The one is by man's deserving it, the other is through God's unmerited favor. Let a man, from the cradle to the grave, be everything he ought to be and do everything he ought to do. Let him, as our author puts it, love God with all his heart and his neighbor as himself, walking "purely, humbly, and beneficently while on earth," and such a one will *inherit* eternal life." But all such pretensions betoken moral and spiritual ignorance and degradation. All men *are sinners*; and being sinners, they are absolutely dependent upon grace.

Mr. Greg's words are based on the incident in our Lord's ministry which called forth the parable of "The Good Samaritan." "A certain lawyer," desirous of testing the Savior's doctrine, put to Him the question, "Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He had heard, no doubt, that the great Rabbi was heretical, disparaging the law of Moses and pointing the common folk to an easy bypath to life. How great then must have been his surprise when he got the answer, "What is written in the law? How do you read it?" In response he repeated the well-known words, so familiar to every Jew, enjoining love to God and man. And surprise must have grown into astonishment when the Savior added, "You have answered rightly; this do and you shall live." The strictest legalist in the Sanhedrin could find no flaw in teaching such as that! But the question was how a man could *inherit* life, and to such a question one and only one answer was possible. To hide his confusion, the lawyer at once proposed a further question, "And who is my neighbor?", thus seeking to escape upon a side issue, as is the way with lawyers of every age. And this drew from the Lord that exquisite story which has taken such hold upon the minds of men. The Greek word for "neighbor" is the *one near*, and the lawyer's inquiry implied that he was not bound to love *every one* with whom he came in contact. The high-caste Jew, if such a phrase may be allowed, would rather die than owe his rescue to a Samaritan, so the Lord brings a Samaritan into the parable, contrasts his conduct with that of the Levite and the priest, and asks which of the three acted as neighbor to the poor wretch whom the robbers had left half dead upon the roadside.

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<sup>2</sup> Διὰ τοῦτο ἐκ πίστεως ἵνα κατὰ χάριν (Rom. 4:16). Theology has no better definition of grace than that given by Aristotle (Rhet 2:7).

Such was the surface teaching of the parable, but in common with every other parable, it had a hidden and spiritual meaning. He had answered the inquiry how a perfect being could *inherit* life. He now unfolds how a ruined sinner can be saved. The traveler upon the road from the city of blessing to the city of the curse is robbed of his all, and left wounded almost to death, and helpless. A priest and a Levite pass by. Why a priest and a Levite? Because He would thus impersonate the law and, in a word, religion. These could help a man who was able to help himself, but for the helpless sinner they can do nothing. "But a certain Samaritan came where he was." Why a Samaritan? Because He would teach that the Savior is One whom, but for his ruin and misery, the sinner would despise and repel. "And"--let us mark the words--"when he saw him he had compassion on him, and went to him, and bound up his wounds, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him." And at the inn he paid the reckoning and made provision for his future.

In every detail the story has its counterpart in spiritual truth. It tells of a Savior who *saves*--who comes to a sinner where he is and as he is, who binds up wounds that are deeper and more terrible than any brigand's knife can inflict, who brings him out of the place of danger to a place of security and peace, and who provides for all his future needs. And all this without bargain or condition, and unconstrained by any motive save His own infinite compassion.

How one longs that honest-minded men like the author of "The Creed of Christendom" could be brought at least to *hear* these truths and to know that *this* is the gospel of Christianity! Their writings give proof that here in Christian England there are persons of enlightenment and culture whose most legitimate revolt against priestcraft and everything of mere religion has thrown them back into pagan darkness. But in the midst of this darkness, light is shining. The agnostic's version of "Christ's grand and simple creed" would make Pharisees of some men--and heaven is absolutely closed to such--while it would relegate mankind in general to the position of hopeless and desperate outlaws. But Holy Scripture testifies that "Christ died for the *ungodly*," and that the man who believes in Him is justified.

And believing in Him has nothing in common with "accepting a string of metaphysical propositions." It means bowing to the Divine judgment upon sin, and accepting Christ as Savior and Lord. Distrust was the turning point in the creature's fall, for the overt act of sin was but the fruit of unbelief. How natural, then, that trust should be the turning point in his recovery! There was a time in England when the wearing of a certain flower was the recognized avowal of loyalty or treason. And this was a mere outward act which might be insincere, whereas a man's beliefs are part and parcel of himself. The tragedy of Calvary has come to be regarded as a mere incident in history, natural in the circumstances, and fitted to emphasize and enhance the dignity of man. God points to it as the world's "crisis," an event of such stupendous moment that, in view of it, indifference is impossible. He who died there does not seek either our pity or our patronage; He claims our *faith*. It is a question of personal loyalty to Himself.

But this chapter is a digression. Let us turn to the teaching of the Epistle to the Romans.