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The Progress of Christian Doctrine

The First of a Series of Radio Addresses Broadcast on the
Westminster Seminary Hour During the Fall of 1936

By the REV. J. GRESHAM MACHEN, D.D., Litt.D.

IN BEGINNING this year's series of radio talks, I want to extend a word of welcome both to old friends whose interest has done so much to encourage us during the past two years and also to those who may be listening in this afternoon for the first time.

For the benefit of both classes of listeners, it may not be amiss for me to say just a word or two about the plan which has governed this Westminster Seminary Hour from the beginning.

What I have been trying to do is to present just as plainly as I can the great system of revealed truth which the Bible contains. When I say "system of truth" I mean what I say. I mean by that that the Bible is not just a storehouse of inspiring sayings, thrown out in some haphazard or isolated fashion, but that it presents one great logically concatenated system which ought to be considered, not just piecemeal, but as a whole.

I have been trying to present that system as a whole. Of course, in doing so I have been conscious not only of my own limitations, but also of the magnitude of the task. It is no easy thing to summarize what is taught in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments in such a way that the logical relations between the various parts of the teaching shall stand out clear, and in such a way that no great division of the teaching shall altogether be neglected.



Fortunately, I do not need to undertake this task as though no one had ever undertaken it before. The Bible has been in the world for nearly nineteen centuries and during all those centuries learned and truly devout men have been searching the Scriptures and have been endeavoring to summarize what the Scriptures teach. Errors in the understanding of the Bible have been detected and avoided. Omissions in the understanding of the Bible have been filled up. There has been study, there has been meditation, there has been discussion; and also there

has been prayer. It would be a very great mistake for a man who desires to present what the Bible teaches to neglect what the church has thought and done during all these centuries.

That does not mean that we should ever be content to take the Bible at second hand. We must be ready always to compare what past generations of Christians and what the great councils of the Christian Church have said in exposition of the Bible with what the Bible itself says. But, after all, the Holy Spirit who inspired the writers of the Bible in the first place has also been present in the church, and has graciously helped those whom He has united to Christ by faith in their understanding of the inspired Word.

He has not, indeed, been active in the church in the same way as that in which He was active when He in-

spired the Biblical writers. He has never made the interpretation of the Bible in the church infallible as He made the Bible itself. The Biblical writers were supernaturally preserved from all error, while even the very best expositors of the Bible have been liable to error, and so also have even the best of the ecclesiastical councils. That is a tremendous difference indeed.

Yet that difference in the manner of the Holy Spirit's working should not obscure the fact that it is the same Spirit who worked in both cases. The Holy Spirit has given us an infallible Bible, and the Holy Spirit has also been present in the church, enlightening the minds of sinners that they may understand God's Word for the saving of their souls, then graciously helping them in their study of the Word and guiding them when they have discussed it in the councils of the church.

It would be a sad mistake indeed if we should cut ourselves off from the past history of the Christian Church in our interpretation of the Word of God.

I am trying not to make that mistake in this little course of talks. I am indeed trying to take you always to the fountain head of truth, the Bible itself; but in my study of the Bible with you I have been dependent throughout upon what the collective wisdom of the church of all ages has been able to do, with the gracious indwelling of the Holy Spirit, toward the understanding of the truth that the Bible contains.

That collective wisdom of the church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, has found expression especially in the great Christian creeds. The earliest of them that we know anything very much about is the so-called Apostles' Creed. It contains only a very small portion of what the Bible teaches. Compared with the great creeds that were to follow, it seems very meagre indeed. I am not one of those who believe that we ought to be content with it as the sole statement of our faith. To be content with it would be to cast despite upon great areas of Biblical teaching; it would mean a woeful impoverishment of our Christian life. Yet the Apostles' Creed is entirely

true as far as it goes, and it represents an important step in the ever fuller presentation of Christian doctrine on the basis of the teaching of God's Word.

Then came the great ecumenical creeds, beginning with the Nicene Creed adopted in the year 325. In those creeds the great Biblical doctrines of the Trinity and of the person of Christ were set forth. They were not set forth without struggle; they were not set forth by indolent souls who shrank from controversy; but they were set forth, after careful examination of plausible errors as they successively arose, and by way of refutation of those errors from the Scriptures.

Is Christ just the greatest of created beings? No, said the church, that is not what the Bible teaches. He is truly God, not a creature. Was He then only of like substance with the Father? No, said the church, that is not what the Bible teaches. He is of the same substance with the Father, and altogether equal to the Father in power and glory. So also the Holy Spirit is equal to the Father and to the Son.

Are then these three—Father, Son and Holy Ghost—three gods? No, said the church, that is not at all what the Bible teaches. There is only one living and true God. Well, then, are Father, Son and Holy Ghost merely three aspects of the one God? No, said the church, that is not what the Bible teaches. They are three persons. They stand in truly personal relations with one another. The

Father loves the Son and the Son the Father. So they are three persons, yet one God. A great mystery, is it not? Yes, a great mystery, but not an absurdity, as unbelievers so glibly represent it as being. A great mystery, which we should never have been able to discover for ourselves, but which God has graciously revealed to us in His holy Word.

But if Christ was one of the persons of the Trinity, if He was very God, is He also man? Yes, said the church, He is also man. He truly became man. So now He is God and man. Well, then, what is the relation of the divine and the human in Christ? Is the humanity of Christ only a partial humanity? Does the divine in Jesus Christ take the place of the human spirit? No, said the church, that is not what the Bible teaches. Christ, according to the Bible, has a complete human nature. Well, then, are the divine and the human in Christ welded together so as to form a third something which is neither divine nor human, or is the human nature somehow caught up into the divine nature so as to be merged with it? No, said the church, that is not what the Bible teaches. The divine nature and the human nature in Christ are distinct the one from the other. Well, then, is the human nature in Christ a distinct person from the divine nature? Did a divine person, the eternal Son of God, merely enter into some sort of wonderfully intimate union with a human person, Jesus of Nazareth? No, indeed, said the church; that is a very great heresy indeed, that is not at all what the Bible teaches. There is only one person in Jesus, and that person is very God, the second person of the Trinity.

So there we have the great doctrine of the person of Christ—"God and man, in two distinct natures, and one person, for ever."

So far the work of the church in the presentation of doctrine was carried on chiefly, though by no means exclusively, in the eastern part of the ancient Mediterranean world. But now we come to something that was accomplished especially in the West. That was the presentation of the Biblical doctrine of sin and divine

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The Progress of Christian Doctrine

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grace by Augustine, who was bishop in North Africa in the region where the ancient Carthage had been.

Is man, after Adam's sin, still able to attain God's favor, still able to do right? Was all that Christ did for man, essentially, to set him a good example and so enable him to break the bad habits into which he had fallen? No, said Augustine, that is not at all what the Bible teaches. The guilt of Adam's first sin, according to the Bible, rests upon all mankind; mankind of itself, since the fall, is hopelessly corrupt; and it is the grace of God alone which makes fallen men able to do what is right.

Augustine's view, rather than that of his opponent, Pelagius, was accepted in principle by the church after a time; and yet it was not permanently accepted in its entirety. Practically, there was a compromise between Augustine's view and the view opposed to it. Complete consistency in the doctrine of sin and grace was not attained.

Then came the Middle Ages. We should be very narrow indeed if we represented that period as being a period of unrelieved darkness. Where in the modern world can we find an achievement like the nave of Amiens Cathedral or the choir of Beauvais? When the moderns begin to equal the splendor of such achievements as these, they may begin to bring a railing accusation against the ages that brought such achievements forth. There are just one or two things about the Middle Ages which cannot be learned from Mark Twain's "Yankee at King Arthur's Court."

Yet in some respects it was a time of darkness, and at the close of it its glories were on the wane.

Then came the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation, and what a burst of freedom was that!

Yet many people who speak very kindly of the Reformation and are laboring under the impression that they are Protestants have not the slightest notion what the Reformation was. They have a sort of vague idea that at the Reformation authority in religion was rejected and every man became his own lawgiver and his own prophet.

Nothing could be further from the fact. As a matter of fact, the founda-

tion of the Reformation was the Bible. Other authorities in religion were rejected, but they were rejected not in the interests of human autonomy, but in the interests of the authority of the Word of God.

In holding to the full truthfulness and absolute authority of the Bible the Reformers were like the great church from which they broke away. They differed from that church in rejecting any infallible, living authority in the interpretation of the Bible, but to the authority of the Bible itself they held on with might and main. Their holding on to it was not a concession that they made reluctantly, as though to give tradition its due and not be too radical all at once. No, it was the thing to which they triumphantly appealed. They were opposed to certain other things just because in their judgment those other things prevented men from attending to and obeying God's Word.

It ought never to be forgotten that the belief in the full truthfulness of the Bible and the absolute authority of the Bible's commands is the foundation principle of the Protestant Reformation. A so-called Protestantism that rejects that principle is no Protestantism at all. It is far more remote from the view of the Reformers than is the great church from which the Reformers broke away.

Not only did the Reformers insist upon the authority of the Bible, but also, in their interpretation of the Bible, they agreed with much that had gone before. They maintained fully the truth of the great early creeds. They accepted the great doctrines of the Trinity and of the person of Christ that those creeds so clearly set forth. They built also upon the doctrine of sin and grace which Augustine had maintained against Pelagius so many centuries before. True Protestants should never admit, unless they will be untrue to their great heritage, that they are without organic connection with the previous history of the church universal.

I think there is an important lesson to be learned at that point from the example of the great Reformers. We also in our day believe that reform is necessary in the church. The larger Protestant churches have many of

them drifted away from their moorings in the Bible; they have become, if the Bible be regarded as the standard, seriously corrupt. At such a time reform is obviously in place.

But how shall reform be accomplished? Some people seem to think that it ought to be accomplished by rejecting or ignoring all that has been done in the Christian Church during all these centuries. Let us just return to the Bible, they say to themselves; we need to make a clean break with all the rubbish of the denominations. So they just sit down and try to summarize what the Bible teaches in some very hasty and brief little statement, and let the great creeds of the church sink, so far as they are concerned, into oblivion.

Now, do you know, I think it is a very great pity when good people proceed in that way. It is splendid that they are returning to the Bible, but in returning to the Bible it is a pity that they reject the help of the historic Christian Church in understanding what the Bible teaches.

I do not want to be misunderstood at this point. I do not think any one formulated human interpretation of the Bible, no matter how worthy it may be, is *essential* to the Christian Church. If we could imagine all the creeds of Christendom as having been suddenly wiped out of men's memories, so that we should have to start all over again in our understanding of the Bible and in our summary setting forth of what the Bible teaches, I believe that in time the necessary creeds of the church would again be built up. It might take another nineteen centuries—if it be God's will that the present age shall remain that long; it might take twice that time. But sooner or later it would be done. The Bible is the really essential thing. It is the foundation; the creeds of the church are the superstructure. Take away the foundation, and all is lost. But take away the superstructure, and the superstructure can be built up again if the foundation remains.

How terrible, however, the loss would in that case be! How terrible it would be if we had to start all over again in our study of the Bible, without help from the great creeds, without help from Augustine, without help from the great theologians of the Reformation!

Thank God, we do not have to

sustain that loss, and it is a very sad mistake to subject ourselves to it in needless fashion as so many are doing today. I think we ought to cherish the great heritage of Christian doctrine with all our mind and heart. I think we ought never to contemplate for one moment cutting loose from the history of the Christian Church.

So in these talks I have been trying to stand in the full current of the church's life. I have been trying to present to you the purest line of progress in Christian doctrine, coming down to us through the great ancient creeds, through Augustine and through the Reformation.

But where runs that purest line of Christian doctrine since the Reformation days? I will tell you very plainly what I think. I think it runs through Calvin and through that type of doctrine that is called the Reformed Faith.

There were certain things about which the leading Reformers of the sixteenth century were agreed. All branches of the Reformation held to the sole authority of the Bible as over against all other authorities. All held, for example, also to the great Biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone. But there were some things about which they differed, and with regard to those differences I stand with Calvin and his associates and followers over against certain other forms of Protestant doctrine. The system of doctrine which Calvin and his associates and followers maintained is sometimes called Calvinism. It is better called, I think, the "Reformed Faith."

That system of doctrine, the "Reformed Faith," spread over a considerable part of Europe. On the continent of Europe the churches holding it came to be called the "Reformed" churches; in Scotland they came to be called the "Presbyterian" churches. Thus the "Reformed" doctrine, in the special sense of the word "Reformed," is the same thing as "Presbyterian" doctrine.

Members of various Reformed churches and various Presbyterian churches came to America, where there are now a considerable number of ecclesiastical bodies using each of these terms. In so far as these bodies have remained true to their historic creeds, they hold to the system of doctrine called the Reformed Faith.

It is that system of doctrine which I am trying to set forth in these Sunday afternoon talks. The reason why I am setting it forth is that I think that it is true, and the reason why I think that it is true is that I think it is taught in the Bible. At countless points it agrees with other systems of Christian doctrine, and I rejoice very greatly in that agreement. At the same time, I make no apologies for trying to set it forth in its entirety. It is, I hold, just consistent Christianity; and consistent Christianity in the long run is the Christianity that stands firmest against unbelief.

If some of my Christian hearers disagree with me at some points I do not think they will be offended. Their very disagreement with some of the things that I say may lead them to turn again to their Bibles that they may consider anew the question of what the Bible means. When they do that, they will have great gain, and I shall rejoice. After all, what I am trying to do on these Sunday afternoons is to study the Bible with you. It should never be forgotten that all Christian doctrine is derived from and must ever be tested by the Word of God.

An objection may perhaps occur to some people at that point. If Christian doctrine consists simply in setting forth what the Bible teaches, and if the Bible is fixed once for all, is not Christian doctrine the enemy of progress?

In order to answer that objection, all that is necessary is just to do a tiny little bit of clear thinking. Suppose it be granted to the Christian that God has told us something once for all in the Bible. Does the acceptance of that thing as true prevent us from going on to the discovery of other things? Because we know one thing, are we prevented from making advance in learning other things? I cannot for the life of me see that we are.

Here we are in this world—sinners and subject to God's wrath and curse. God has saved us by the saving work of Jesus Christ. He has provided a record of that salvation in the Bible and has told us the things that we need to know in connection with it and in connection with its application in men's lives. He has graciously given us a revelation of Himself in the Bible, a revelation of our lost

condition, and a revelation of the way in which lost sinners are saved. That is His Word or His message to men.

Suppose we accept it as His Spirit enables us to do, for the saving of our souls. Are we then prevented from going to an ever fuller knowledge of things that His Word does not contain—things that are presented to us by God Himself in the universe that He has made? Not a bit of it, my friends.

Quite the contrary. An acceptance of what God has told us once for all in His Word removes the shackles of sin and sets us free to enter into ever wider avenues of knowledge. Far from being opposed to progress, an acceptance of the truth of the Bible makes real progress possible. When the Bible is rejected, as it has been so widely rejected, you find decadence like that which is so plainly manifest all over the world today. True progress for humanity, now so sadly arrested, will begin again when men return to the Word of God and build upon that solid foundation.

FEDERAL COUNCIL ELECTS SECRETARY, MERGES PAPERS

THE Rev. Roswell P. Barnes was elected associate general secretary of the Modernist-dominated Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America at a meeting of the council's executive committee held in New York on November 25th.

Mr. Barnes, formerly associate secretary of the council's Department of International Justice and Goodwill, will share in the responsibilities of general administration under the present general secretary, Dr. Samuel McCrea Cavert, outspoken champion of Modernism.

A recommendation that *Information Service*, a four-page weekly published by the Department of Research and Education of the Federal Council, be merged with the council's official monthly, the *Federal Council Bulletin*, was adopted at the same meeting. The committee suggested that *Information Service* be incorporated in the *Bulletin* as a supplement, carrying no advertisements. The name of the merged publication will be, for the present, the *Federal Council Bulletin and Information Service*.