



And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: Of sin, because they believe not on me; Of righteousness, because I go to the Father, and ye see me no more; Of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged.

John 16:8–11

It is worse than useless for Christians to talk about the importance of Christian morality unless they are prepared to take their stand upon the fundamentals of Christian theology. It is a lie to say that dogma does not matter; it matters enormously. It is fatal to let people suppose that Christianity is only a mode of feeling; it is vitally necessary to insist that it is first and foremost a rational explanation of the universe. It is hopeless to offer Christianity as a vaguely idealistic aspiration of a simple and consoling kind; it is, on the contrary, a hard, tough, exacting, and complex doctrine, steeped in a drastic and uncompromising realism. And it is fatal to imagine that everybody knows quite well what Christianity is and needs only a little encouragement to practice it. The brutal fact is that in this Christian country not one per-

son in a hundred has the faintest notion what the Church teaches about God or man or society or the person of Jesus Christ.

If you think I am exaggerating, ask the army chaplains. Apart from a possible one percent of intelligent and instructed Christians, there are three kinds of people we have to deal with. There are the frank and open heathen, whose notions of Christianity are a dreadful jumble of rags and tags of Bible anecdotes and clotted mythological nonsense. There are the ignorant Christians, who combine a mild, gentle-Jesus sentimentality with vaguely humanistic ethics—most of these are Arian heretics.* Finally, there are the more-or-less instructed churchgoers, who know all the arguments about divorce and auricular confession and communion in two kinds, but are about as well equipped to do battle on fundamentals against a Marxian atheist or a Wellsian agnostic as a boy with a peashooter facing a fan-fire of machine guns. Theologically, this country is at present in a state of utter chaos, established in the name of religious toleration, and rapidly degenerating into the flight from

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reason and the death of hope. We are not happy in this condition, and there are signs of a very great eagerness, especially among the younger people, to find a creed to which they can give wholehearted adherence.

This is the Church's opportunity, if she chooses to take it. So far as the people's readiness to listen goes, she has not been in so strong a position for at least two centuries. The rival philosophies of humanism, enlightened self-interest, and mechanical progress have broken down badly; the antagonism of science has proved to be far more apparent than real; and the happy-go-lucky doctrine of *laissez-faire* is completely discredited. But no good whatever will be done by a retreat into personal piety or by mere exhortation to a recall to prayer. The thing that is in danger is the whole structure of society, and it is necessary to persuade thinking men and women of the vital and intimate connection between the structure of society and the theological doctrines of Christianity.

The task is not made easier by the obstinate refusal of a great body of nominal Christians, both lay and clerical, to face the theological question. "Take away theology and give us some nice religion" has been a popular slogan for so long that we are likely to accept it, without inquiring whether religion without theology has any meaning. And however unpopular I may make myself, I shall and will affirm that the reason why the churches are discredited today is not that they are too bigoted about theology, but that they have run away from theology. The Church of Rome is a theological society, in a sense in which the Church of England, taken as a whole, is not, and that because of this insistence of theology, she is a body disciplined, honored, and sociologically important.

I should like to do two things. First, to point out that if we really want a Christian society, we must teach Christianity, and that it is absolutely impossible to teach Christianity without teaching Christian dogma. Secondly, to put before you a list of half a dozen or so main doctrinal points that the world most especially needs to have drummed into its ears at this moment—doctrines forgotten or misinterpreted but

which (if they are true as the Church maintains them to be) are cornerstones in that rational structure of human society that is the alternative to world chaos.

I will begin with this matter of the inevitability of dogma, if Christianity is to be anything more than a little, mild, wishful thinking about ethical behavior.

Writing in *The Spectator*, Dr. Selbie, former Principal of Mansfield College, discussed the subject of "The Army and the

Churches." In the course of this article there occurs a passage that exposes the root cause of the failure of the churches to influence the life of the common people.

...the rise of the new dogmatism, whether in its Calvinist or Thomist form, constitutes a fresh and serious threat to Christian unity. The tragedy is that *all this, however interesting to theologians, is hopelessly irrelevant to the life and thought of the average man*, who is more puzzled than ever by the disunion of the Churches, and by the theological and ecclesiastical differences on which it is based.

Now I am perfectly ready to agree that disputes between the churches constitute a menace to Christendom. And I will admit that I am not quite sure what is meant by the new dogmatism; it might, I suppose, mean the appearance of new dogmas among the followers of St. Thomas and Calvin, respectively. But I rather fancy it means a fresh attention to, and reassertion of, old dogma, and that when Dr. Selbie says that all this is irrelevant to the life and thought of the average man, he is deliberately saying that Christian dogma, as such, is irrelevant.

But if Christian dogma is irrelevant to life, to what, in Heaven's name, is it relevant?—since religious dogma is in fact nothing but a statement of doctrines concerning the nature of life and the universe. If Christian ministers really believe it is only an intellectual game for theologians and has no bearing upon human life, it is no wonder that their congregations are ignorant, bored, and bewildered. And, indeed, in the very next paragraph, Dr. Selbie recognizes the relation of Christian dogma to life:

...peace can come about only through a practical application of Christian principles and values. But this must have behind it something *more than a reaction against that pagan humanism* that has been found wanting.

The “something more” is dogma, and cannot be anything else, for between humanism and Christianity and between paganism and theism there is no distinction whatever except a distinction of dogma. That you cannot have Christian principles without Christ is becoming increasingly clear because their validity as principles depends on Christ’s authority; and as we have seen, the totalitarian states, having ceased to believe in Christ’s authority, are logically quite justified in repudiating Christian principles. If the average man is required to believe in Christ and accept His authority for Christian principles, it is surely relevant to inquire who or what Christ is, and why His authority should be accepted. But the question, “What think ye of Christ?” lands the average man at once in the very knottiest kind of dogmatic riddle. It is quite useless to say that it doesn’t matter particularly who or what Christ was or by what authority he did those things, and that even if he was only a man, he was a very nice man and we ought to live by his principles; for that is merely humanism, and if the average man in Germany chooses to think that Hitler is a nicer sort of man with still more attractive principles, the Christian humanist has no answer to make.

It is not true at all that dogma is hopelessly irrelevant to the life and thought of the average man. What is true is that ministers of the Christian religion often assert that it is, present it for consideration as though it were, and, in fact, by their faulty exposition of it make it so. The central dogma of the Incarnation is that by which relevance stands or falls. If Christ were only man, then he is entirely irrelevant to any thought about God; if he is only God, then he is entirely irrelevant to any experience of human life. It is, in the strictest sense, necessary to the salvation of relevance that a man should believe rightly the Incarnation of Our Lord, Jesus Christ. Unless he believes rightly, there is not the faintest reason why he should believe at all. And in that case, it is wholly irrelevant to chatter about Christian principles.

If the average man is going to be interested in Christ at all, it is the dogma that will provide the interest. The trouble is that, in nine cases out of ten, he has never been offered the dogma. What he has been offered is a set of technical theological terms that nobody has taken the trouble to translate into language relevant to ordinary life.

“... Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man.” What does this suggest, except that God the Creator (the irritable, old gentleman with the beard) in some mysterious manner fathered upon the Virgin Mary something amphibious, neither one thing nor t’other, like a merman? And, like human sons, wholly distinct from and (with some excuse) probably antagonistic to

the father? And what, in any case, has this remarkable hybrid to do with John Doe or Jane Doe? This attitude of mind is that called by theologians Nestorianism, or perhaps a debased form of Arianism. But we really cannot just give it a technical label and brush it aside as something irrelevant to the thought of the average man. The average man produced it. It is, in fact, an immediate and unsophisticated expression of the thought of the average man. And at the risk of plunging him into the abominable heresy of the Patripassians or the Theopaschites, we must unite with Athanasius to assure John and Jane Doe that the God who lived and died in the world was the same God who made the world, and that, therefore, God himself has the best possible reasons for understanding and sympathizing with John and Jane’s personal troubles.

“But,” John Doe and Jane Doe will instantly object, “it can’t have mattered very much to him if he was God. A god can’t really suffer like you and me. Besides, the parson says we are to try and be like Christ; but that’s all nonsense—we can’t be God, and it’s silly to ask us to try.” This able exposition of the Eutychian heresy can scarcely be dismissed as merely “interesting to theologians”; it appears to interest John and Jane to the point of irritation. Willy-nilly, we are forced to involve ourselves further in dogmatic theology and insist that Christ is perfect God and perfect man.

At this point, language will trip us up. The average man is not to be restrained from thinking that “perfect God” implies a comparison with gods less perfect, and that “perfect man” means “the best kind of man you can possibly have.” While both these propositions are quite true, they are not precisely what we want to convey. It will perhaps be better to say, “altogether God and altogether man”—God and man at the same time, in every respect and completely; God from eternity to eternity and from the womb to the grave, a man also from the womb to the grave and now.

“That,” replies John Doe, “is all very well, but it leaves me cold. Because, if he was God all the time, he must have known that his sufferings and death and so on wouldn’t last, and he could have stopped them by a miracle if he had liked, so his pretending to be an ordinary man was nothing but playacting.” And Jane Doe adds, “You can’t call a person ‘altogether man’ if he was God and didn’t want to do anything wrong. It was easy enough for him to be good, but it’s not at all the same thing for me. How about all that temptation stuff? Playacting again. It doesn’t help me to live what you call a Christian life.”

John and Jane are now on the way to becoming convinced Apollinarians, a fact which, however interesting to theologians, has a distinct relevance also to the lives of those average men, since they propose, on

the strength of it, to dismiss Christian principles as impracticable. There is no help for it. We must insist upon Christ's possession of a reasonable soul as well as human flesh; we must admit the human limitations of knowledge and intellect; we must take a hint from Christ himself and suggest that miracles belong to the Son of Man as well as to the Son of God; we must postulate a human will liable to temptation; and we must be quite firm about "equal to the Father as touching his Godhead and inferior to the Father as touching his manhood." Complicated as the theology is, the average man has walked straight into the heart of the Athanasian Creed, and we are bound to follow.

Teachers and preachers never, I think, make it sufficiently clear that dogmas are not a set of arbitrary regulations invented *a priori* by a committee of theologians enjoying a bout of all-in dialectical wrestling. Most of them were hammered out under pressure of urgent practical necessity to provide an answer to heresy. And heresy is, as I have tried to show, largely the expression of opinion of the untutored average man, trying to grapple with the problems of the universe at the point where they begin to interfere with daily life and thought. To me, engaged in my diabolical occupation of going to and fro in the world and walking up and down in it, conversations and correspondence bring daily a magnificent crop of all the standard heresies. I am extremely well familiar with them as practical examples of the life and thought of the average man, though I had to hunt through the encyclopedia to fit them with their proper theological titles for the purposes of this address. For the answers I need not go so far; they are compendiously set forth in the creeds.

But an interesting fact is this: that nine out of ten of my heretics are exceedingly surprised to discover that the creeds contain any statements that bear a practical and comprehensible meaning. If I tell them it is an article of faith that the same God who made the world endured the suffering of the world, they ask in perfect good faith what connection there is between that statement and the story of Jesus. If I draw their attention to the dogma that the same Jesus who was the divine love was also the light of light, the divine wisdom, they are surprised. Some of them thank me very heartily for this entirely novel and original interpretation of Scripture, which they never heard of before and suppose me to have invented. Others say irritably that they don't like to think that wisdom and religion have anything to do with each other, and that I should do much better to cut out the wisdom and reason and intelligence and stick to a simple gospel of love. But whether they are pleased or annoyed, they are interested; and the thing that inter-

ests them, whether or not they suppose it to be my invention, is the resolute assertion of the dogma.

As regards Dr. Selbie's complaint that insistence on dogma only affronts people and throws into relief the internecine quarrels of Christendom, may I say two things? First, I believe it to be a grave mistake to present Christianity as something charming and popular with no offense in it. Seeing that Christ went about the world giving the most violent offense to all kinds of people, it would seem absurd to expect that the doctrine of his person can be so presented as to offend nobody. We cannot blink at the fact that gentle Jesus, meek and mild, was so stiff in his opinions and so inflammatory in his language that he was thrown out of church, stoned, hunted from place to place, and finally gibbeted as a firebrand and a public danger. Whatever his peace was, it was not the peace of an amiable indifference; and he said in so many words that what he brought with him was fire and sword. That being so, nobody need be too much surprised or disconcerted at finding that a determined preaching of Christian dogma may sometimes result in a few angry letters of protest or a difference of opinion on the parish council.

The other thing is this: that I find by experience there is a very large measure of agreement among Christian denominations on all doctrine that is really ecumenical. A rigidly Catholic interpretation of the creeds, for example—including the Athanasian Creed—will find support both in Rome and in Geneva. Objections will come chiefly from the heathen, and from a noisy but not very representative bunch of heretical parsons who once in their youth read Robertson or Conybeare and have never got over it. But what is urgently necessary is that certain fundamentals should be restated in terms that make their meaning—and indeed, the mere fact that they have a meaning—dear to the ordinary, uninstructed heathen to whom technical theological language has become a dead letter. ■

Dorothy L. Sayers (1893–1957) was an English crime writer, poet, playwright, essayist, translator, and Christian humanist.

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*Or possibly Adoptionists; they do not formulate their theories with any great precision.—D.L.S.