

Behind the Truth by Gordon H. Clark

The twentieth century, under the influences of several forms of existentialism, is widely infected with the virus of anti-intellectualism. This is seen not only in the secular philosophers but also in professing Christians. The subject of this article is one such instance; but it will be introduced by some remarks on John 8:48ff.

Consider now John 8:48ff. The Jews have accused Jesus of being a devil-possessed Samaritan. In rejecting their accusation, Jesus says, "If any one keeps my word, he shall never see death ever." It is to be admitted and indeed insisted upon, that this verse requires more than simply understanding Jesus' word or words. In fact Jesus' enemies often understood him fairly well. They understood on a previous occasion that he made himself equal with God. At the end of the present passage they apparently understand his claim to deity, for they attempted to stone him. Had he merely claimed to be the Messiah, they would not have stoned him. They might have rejected and ridiculed him, but they did not equate a messianic claim with a claim to Deity. Others had made messianic claims without incurring such hatred. Later on the young man who was to become the Apostle Paul understood perfectly what the Christians were preaching: that is why he persecuted them. Clearly then Jesus in John 8:51 demands more than a simple understanding of his claim.

The "more" that goes beyond simple understanding in "keeping" his word. The verb "to keep" means: watch over, take care of, guard; give heed to, observe, notice, test by observation or trial; preserve, retain. From these connotations it follows that if some of the words or doctrines are commands, keeping means obedience. Other words, not commands, but doctrines such as the claims to be the messiah, to be one with the Father, to be the Bread of Life and the Light of the World, are "kept" simply by believing them. Of course no one can believe words he does not understand. Understanding is not disparaged by saying that something more is needed, namely belief. Understanding is a prerequisite to belief, otherwise a missionary would not need to learn the native language.

Nevertheless the sole object Jesus refers to is his word, his words, his doctrine, dogma, or teaching. It is this that must be kept. Jesus does not speak of anything in addition to, hidden behind, or exalted above his doctrine. There is nothing irrational, mysterious, illogical, or inexpressible to which he directs attention. The promise of escaping death is based completely and solely on Jesus' word: "if anyone keep my word, he shall never, never, see death ever."

Another view of the matter comes all too frequently from people who think they are evangelical and biblical. Consider the following. Certain omissions are made, not only because of length, but also because the writer is confused and includes perfectly good ideas with the bad. It is the material quoted

to which objection must be made.

“The battle line, the warfare today, is not necessarily between the fundamentalist and the liberal. There is a difference between them, of course ... but I don't think the warfare is over these matters any more... The warfare, the dividing line today, is between evangelical rationalists and evangelical mystics....

“There is something behind the text that you've got to get through to... Is the body of Christian truth enough? Or does truth have a soul as well as a body? The evangelical rationalist says that all talk about the soul of truth is poetic nonsense. The body of truth is all you need, if you believe the body of truth you are on your way to heaven and you can't backslide and everything will be all right and you will get a crown in the last day. ... Just as Colossians argues against Manichaeism and Galatians argues against Jewish legalism, so the book of John is a long, inspired, passionately outpoured book trying to save us from evangelical rationalism, the doctrine that says the text is enough. Textualism is as deadly as liberalism.”¹

¹ The Presbyterian Journal, Feb. 11 1970, pages 7,8, reprinting of a sermon by A.W. Tozer in Tozer Pulpit, Vol 3.

If now the reader will kindly note the points quoted and compare them with the criticisms below, he will see the significance of the debate. First of all one must ask whether a man who insists on the truth of God's word, and in fact understands the Bible as well as or even better than most evangelicals is a greater enemy than, or as great an enemy as, a man who denies that God created the world and denies the Deity of Christ – the two items which the quoted author distinguishes between fundamentalists and liberals.

In the second place, does a distinction between the body and the soul of truth have a meaning or is it poetic nonsense? A century or two ago some Puritans wrote books on theology and used the title, The Body of Divinity. This title is a figure of speech, yet it has an intelligible meaning. It means the several theological doctrines that the author thinks most important. But when a contrast is made between the truths themselves and something different from them called their soul, intelligible meaning is surely replaced by poetic nonsense. The best evidence of its poetic nonsense is that its meaning cannot be stated in literal language. The meaning of the title Body of Divinity can be stated: it is several important truths themselves. But neither the author quoted nor others explain what this “soul” is. The author contents himself with disparaging the truth, or the body of truth, without giving any

indication of what this other thing is.

Then, Third, it is amazing that the author describes the Gospel of John as a passionate attack on evangelical rationalism. John's Gospel contains at least twenty-three instances of the word truth, none of which disparages the truth; it also contains thirteen instances of the adjective true, and eight instances of another adjective of substantially the same meaning; in addition to which there are about ten instances of the adverb, some of which, however, contribute little to the present subject. John also lays stress on the Word and the words, beginning in his very first verse and working up to a tremendous condemnation of the Jews, in chapter five, for their refusal to believe the words of Moses.

This passage and others similar show the inaccuracies of classifying “evangelical rationalists” with the Pharisees. The author has said, “Your evangelical rationalist ... says what the Pharisees, the worst enemies Jesus had while on earth, said: “Well, truth is truth and if you believe the truth you've got it.” This attempt to picture the “evangelical rationalist” as the worst enemies Jesus has had since he was on earth fails because the Pharisees did not believe the truth. If they had believed the writings of Moses, they would have believed the words of Christ.

Note again what John says: “Ye seek to kill me because my doctrine makes no progress in you” (John 8:37). Then Jesus continues, “I speak the things I have seen with my Father. You, on the other hand, do the things you have heard from your father ... the devil.” It is positively amazing that even an Arminian can so misconstrue the Gospel of John and so attack those who believe John's words.

Now, it is frequently dangerous to make quotations and omit some of the context. I must therefore say something of my omissions. Before doing so, however, I should like to illustrate the danger from the author's sermon. He says, “The Theologian rationalists say your faith should stand not in the wisdom of man but in the Word of God. Paul didn't say that at all. He said your faith should stand in the power of God. That's quite a different thing.” There the sermon quotes part of I Cor. 2:9-14. It is the familiar passage, “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard ... the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God.” To the end of verse 11, the author quotes in full, even the verse that says, “unto us God revealed them through the Spirit.” But verses 12-13 are omitted: “we received not the spirit of the world but the spirit which is from God that we might know the things that were freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Spirit teacheth, combining spiritual things with spiritual (words).” Then the author continues with verse 14. The impression that the author apparently wants to make, although he does not expressly draw the implication, is that knowledge of the truth is unimportant or even impossible. If this is not what he means, his quotation hangs in mid air: it does not connect with his immediately preceding antithesis between the power of God and the Word [capital W] of God. But when the passage is read in its

entirely, one sees that this knowledge, unobtainable by scientific or empirical methods, is possible by revelation and was understood and believed by “us”. The apostle certainly distinguishes between two proposed methods of learning; but there is no disparagement of the truth nor any appeal to a “soul” that is different from the body of truths.

Now, concerning omissions I have made. Of course, an interested student can consult the sermon and see for himself; but until he does so, here are a few remarks.

First, the criticism is not that the sermon is devoid of all truth, but that it contains serious error. The sermon does indeed contain several true and important statements. One is the author's insistence on the need of illumination. He says “Revelation is not enough. There must be illumination before revelation can get into your soul.” This is true. In fact this is part of what Paul has said in I Cor. 2:2-14. But the antithesis that the author draws between revelation and illumination is false. Illumination is not the “soul” of the truth. There is no implication that “the truth is more than the text.” It is false to say that “there is something behind the text that you've got to get through to.” Rather, illumination is what enables you to “get through” to the text. Illumination is a figure of speech, but it is not poetic nonsense. The figure compares light shining on a physical object with God's causing us to accept the truth. Not that it is the truth that God illumines. He does not substitute some other object beside, behind, or above the truth. Illumination does not alter, add to, or subtract from the truth. It causes us to focus on the truth just as it is. Thus, although the antithesis between experience and revelation is sound, the ideas that illumination adds something to the truth and “gets us through to” some different object is unsound and false. If we want some poetry that is not nonsense, let us sing with Cowper, “The Spirit breathes upon the word and brings the truth to sight.”

Among the semblances omitted in my quotation is, “conversion is a miraculous act of God by the Holy Ghost.” Substantially this is correct. Regeneration would have been a better word than conversion, and the Protestant Reformation insisted that the age of miracles is past. But aside from these two points, it is true that regeneration is a supernatural act of God. Faith too is a supernatural gift of God. But the life which the new birth initiates and the faith that is its exercise is informed by the truth. It is not true to say, “God taught him in secret that truth had a soul as well as a body [this is poetic nonsense] and he dared to get through and pursue by penitence and obedience until God honored his faith and flashed the light on.” Note how unbiblical this is. The human being “dares,” “to get through” - whatever that means - and because of repentance and obedience which are indubitably scriptural requirements, God honors his faith and gives him illumination. This attributes merit to a man's daring. It obscures, really it denies that faith is a gift of God. Then because of this daring and faith, God rewards the man by giving him illumination. Preposterous! It is hard to get the plan of salvation more

backwards than this. The scripture nowhere teaches that faith is a reward of repentance and obedience. It is a gift of God. One must first believe that what Christ says is true before he can repent and obey. Unless “The light is flashed on” at the beginning, a man will not accept the Scripture as truth.

In conclusion, the most important line of battle is that between the acceptance and the rejection of God's truth. Everything else is subsidiary. The Jews did not accept the truth of God. To them Jesus said, “If anyone retains my doctrine, he shall never never see death ever.”