

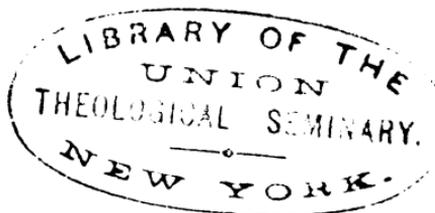
TIMELY TOPICS.

POLITICAL, BIBLICAL, ETHICAL, PRACTICAL.

DISCUSSED

BY COLLEGE PRESIDENTS, PROFESSORS AND EMINENT
WRITERS OF OUR TIME.

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NEW YORK:
E. B. TREAT, 5 Cooper Union,
1892.



WHAT IS TRUTH?*

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PILATE said unto Him, What is truth? (John xviii., 38.) I did not hear Pilate say these words and I do not know whether he was jesting, as Bacon says, or not. Much depends, as we all know—and this is just as true of written as of spoken utterances—on emphasis and accent, on tone and qualifying phrases, and this is something that both readers and writers would do well always to bear in mind. The speaker will probably show the spirit he is of in the way he asks the question.

But Pilate altogether apart this famous interrogation may at the present day pass from the lips of the philosopher, the religious inquirer, or the scoffer. Each will probably show the spirit he is of in the way he asks it. What is truth? What meaning do you impose upon this word? The answer leads so rationally to suggestions that are eminently appropriate to all the circumstances of to-day that I think we may spend a few moments in its consideration.

“What is truth?” Truth is the correspondence between thought and reality. A fact in the outward world or an event, is not truth. The river or the wind-mill which you pass during an evening’s drive, the events of history, are all facts but not truths. The world we live in might have been as full of material for thought as it now is, but had no thinker appeared there would have been no truth. Our thought relation implies the great thinker whom we call

* Abstract of Baccalaureate sermon, delivered May 7th, 1891.

God. That, indeed, is the great inference to which we are led in our attempt to impose a meaning upon this word truth. In every case the endeavor is, to bring the mind into harmony with the actual, so that there shall be the closest consonance between the thought of the thing and the thing itself. Truth is not the thing; it is the accurate thought of the thing. Truth is thought's relation to reality, truth is the word we use when we wish to say that thought and things match each other perfectly. There is no truth where there is no thought. No man has truth imparted to him. He may swallow facts and repeat formulas, but until he thinks he is a stranger to truth. Your text-book will do you as much good in your pocket, as in your memory, if you have not thought over its statements for yourself.

The training you have received here will prepare you for putting a proper valuation upon some rhetorical statements about truth that are so common as to be misleading, for men write truth in capitals, speak of her in the feminine gender, and say she is relative and partial; and that what passes for truth in one age is discarded in the next; or indeed that the question, "What is truth?" if by it, you mean, what are the contents of your knowledge chest, is one that cannot be answered. Of course truth is relative; that is, one man knows one thing and another knows something else. Truth being the consonance of my thought with reality, it must be relative. It must be relative, for my range of vision is limited, and I trouble myself about some things, and let others severely alone. Then what is truth? The question is asked this time in a tone of anxiety that betrays a personal interest. It is now a question of religious truth. There is no way of keeping young men from coming in contact with the religious problems of the age. They cannot well be educated men without coming in contact with them, for the open questions in science and philosophy involve them. It is not unnatural for young men to think that the old is false

and the new is to supersede it, and that this should have a disturbing influence upon the early faiths of educated young men. I am sorry for the young man who feels that his faith is undergoing eclipse ; and that his education is lifting a barrier between him and those who are most dear to him, by preventing him from sharing their religious faiths in the fulness of the old and unhesitating confidence. I pity the man who feels as he leaves college that he has more philosophy and less Bible than when he entered. Far sooner would I, that a son of mine should never enter a college door, than that his college learning should be gained at the cost of his Christian faith. And yet I suppose there is a quiet process of reconstruction of religious faith that goes on in the minds of a great many young men, and an anxiety, consequently, of which very few of us have any idea. There are flippant men who ask, "What is truth?" as though they did not care. But the men of whom I am speaking now, are speaking soberly. Would to God I could speak a helpful word to such to-day—the last time I may have a chance to answer the question, "What is truth?"

Your college training has done either of two things for you in a greater or less degree. It has increased your love for truth or lessened it, for I am a full believer in the truth that men get good in college that does not show in classroom. Now, young men, I tell you that you may be earnest, charitable, and full of good works, but unless Jesus of Nazareth is distinguished both in person and in work by marked supernaturalism your Christianity with all its earnestness is only a baptized paganism.

When I see young men can carry the Christian name and really illustrate so many of the features of Christian life, and yet make a positive denial of essential truth, or, by their indifference to it, sacrifice the dearest interest of Christian truth, I am disheartened. I am not contending here for a sectarian theology. I am preaching to you on the broad

lines of Catholic Christianity, and am trying to present to you the essence of Christian faith. I only wish that you should realize that Christianity, if it is anything, if it deserves any enduring place, if it has any exceptional claims, if it brings any word of comfort, if it has any voice of authority, rests upon the doctrine that Jesus Christ was delivered for our offences, and raised again for our justification. It is not true that Christianity is a life and not a doctrine. It is a life because it is a doctrine. A religion that sees only the human side of Christ always calls him Jesus; the religion that looks only upon ethical states and preaches only the moralities of life, a religion that holds that love is the greatest thing in the world, and is satisfied with the sweetness and tenderness of Christian feeling, is a religion of which the best that you can say is, that it is trying to keep the fruits of Christianity living, while it lays the axe at the root of the tree which bears them.

Now I say, I dare to say—would to God that men would heed me—that if I must choose between life and dogma, I will say that Christianity is not a life, but a dogma. You cannot live the Christian life without holding the Christian dogma, the one emanates solely from the other. This dogma's great supposition is, that man is a sinner and that without the shedding of the blood there is no remission of sin. Its great fact is that Jesus was the propitiation of our sins, and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world. It comes to us saying in a thousand ways that we cannot be justified by the works of the law, but that being justified by faith, we have peace with God. Its one shining and conspicuous miracle is the resurrection of Christ. Its doctrine of the incarnation separates it from all the religions in the world.

If you are in earnest, my friends, and you want to know what you shall do to keep your Christian faith on rational grounds, I will tell you how to get at the heart of the ques-

tion without delay. You believe in God. Add to your theism the Incarnate Christ, and you have found the truth. The pitched battle of unbelief is here. It is history *versus* philosophy. Settle with yourself whether you will let your rationalistic philosophy settle your history; or whether you will make history qualify your philosophy. Will you permit theory to make fact, or fact to make theory? This is the crucial question of theological debate; not the inspiration of the Scripture nor the authorship of the Pentateuch.

Young men of the senior class, you lately won a battle in athletic games, then remember that ordinary events in life are often parables to us. There are battles we have to fight and victories we hope to win all through life. You know how you did it. You know the patience, you know the training and the faith that entered into it. Self-confidence is the beginning of great acts. You contested that you might win an earthly crown; but do not forget, my friends, that there is a crown of righteousness that fadeth not away. Go forth to-day in the strength of Christian character, stand like true soldiers on the battlefield and fight your hardest.