**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**ROMANS-014**. **THE FORM OF TEACHING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"... Ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you."*

*Romans 6:17*

There is room for difference of opinion as to what Paul precisely means by form here. The word so rendered appears in English as type, and has a similar variety of meaning. It signifies originally a mark made by pressure or impact; and then, by natural transitions, a mould, or more generally a pattern or example, and then the copy of such an example or pattern, or the cast from such a mould. It has also the other meaning which its English equivalent has taken on very extensively of late years, such as, for instance, you find in expressions like An English type of face, meaning thereby the general outline which preserves the distinguishing characteristics of a thing. Now we may choose between these two meanings in our text. If the Apostle means type in the latter sense of the word, then the rendering form is adequate, and he is thinking of the Christian teaching which had been given to the Roman Christians as possessing certain well-defined characteristics which distinguished it from other kinds of teaching--such, for instance, as Jewish or heathen.

But if we take the other meaning, then he is, in true Pauline fashion, bringing in a vivid and picturesque metaphor to enforce his thought, and is thinking of the teaching which the Roman Christians had received as being a kind of mould into which they were thrown, a pattern to which they were to be conformed. And that that is his meaning seems to me to be made a little more probable by the fact that the last words of my text would be more accurate if inverted, and instead of reading, as the Authorised Version does, that form of doctrine which was delivered you, we were to read, as the Revised Version does, that form whereunto ye were delivered.

If this be the general meaning of the words before us, there are three thoughts arising from them to which I turn briefly. First, Paul's Gospel was a definite body of teaching; secondly, that teaching is a mould for conduct and character; lastly, that teaching therefore demands obedience. Take, then, these three thoughts.

**I. First, Paul's Gospel was a definite body of teaching.**

Now the word doctrine, which is employed in my text, has, in the lapse of years since the Authorised Version was made, narrowed its significance. At the date of our Authorised translation doctrine was probably equivalent to teaching, of whatever sort it might be. Since then it has become equivalent to a statement of abstract principles, and that is not at all what Paul means. He does not mean to say that his gospel was a form of doctrine in the sense of being a theological system, but he means to say that it was a body of teaching, the nature of the teaching not being defined at all by the word.

Therefore we have to notice that the great, blessed peculiarity of the Gospel is that it is a teaching, not of abstract dry principles, but of concrete historical facts. From these principles in plenty may be gathered, but in its first form as it comes to men fresh from God it is not a set of propositions, but a history of deeds that were done upon earth. And, therefore, is it fitted to be the food of every soul and the mould of every character.

Jesus Christ did not come and talk to men about God, and say to them what His Apostles afterwards said, God is love, but He lived and died, and that mainly was His teaching about God. He did not come to men and lay down a theory of atonement or a doctrine of propitiation, or theology about sin and its relations to God, but He went to the Cross and gave Himself for us, and that was His teaching about sacrifice. He did not say to men There is a future life, and it is of such and such a sort, but He came out of the grave and He said Touch Me, and handle Me. A spirit hath not flesh and bones, and therefore He brought life and immortality to light, by no empty words but by the solid realities of facts. He did not lecture upon ethics, but He lived a perfect human life out of which all moral principles that will guide human conduct may be gathered. And so, instead of presenting us with a hortus siccus, with a botanic collection of scientifically arranged and dead propositions, He led us into the meadow where the flowers grow, living and fair. His life and death, with all that they imply, are the teaching.

Let us not forget, on the other hand, that the history of a fact is not the mere statement of the outward thing that has happened. Suppose four people, for instance, standing at the foot of Christ's Cross; four other evangelists than the four that we know. There is a Roman soldier; there is a Pharisee; there is one of the weeping crowd of poor women, not disciples; and there is a disciple. The first man tells the fact as he saw it: A Jewish rebel was crucified this morning. The second man tells the fact: A blaspheming apostate suffered what he deserved to-day. The woman tells the fact: A poor, gentle, fair soul was martyred to-day. And the fourth one tells the fact: Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died for our sins. The three tell the same fact; the fourth preaches the Gospel--that is to say, Christian teaching is the facts plus their explanation; and it is that which differentiates it from the mere record which is of no avail to anybody. So Paul himself in one of his other letters puts it. This is his gospel: Jesus of Nazareth died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and He was buried, and rose again the third day, according to the Scriptures. That is what turns the bald story of the facts into teaching, which is the mould for life.

So on the one hand, dear brethren, do not let us fall into the superficial error of fancying that our religion is a religion of emotion and morality only. It is a religion with a basis of divine truth, which, being struck away, all the rest goes. There is a revolt against dogma to-day, a revolt which in large measure is justified as an essential of progress, and in large measure as an instance of progress; but human nature is ever prone to extremes, and in the revolt from man's dogma there is danger of casting away God's truth. Christianity is not preserved when we hold by the bare facts of the outward history, unless we take with these facts the interpretation of them, which declares the divinity and the sacrifice of the Son of God.

And on the other hand, let us keep very clear in our minds the broad and impassable gulf of separation between the Christian teaching as embodied in the Scripture and the systems which Christianity has evolved therefrom. Men's intellects must work upon the pabulum that is provided for them, and a theology in a systematised form is a necessity for the intellectual and reasonable life of the Christian Church. But there is all the difference between man's inferences from and systematising of the Christian truth and the truth that lies here. The one is the golden roof that is cast over us; the other is too often but the spiders webs that are spun across and darken its splendour. It is a sign of a wholesome change in the whole sentiment and attitude of the modern Christian mind that the word doctrine, which has come to mean men's inferences from God's truth, should have been substituted as it has been in our Revised Version of my text, by the wholesome Christian word teaching. The teaching is the facts with the inspired commentary on them.

**II. Secondly, notice that this teaching is in Paul's judgment a mould or pattern according to which men's lives are to be conformed.**

There can be no question but that, in that teaching as set forth in Scripture, there does lie the mightiest formative power for shaping our lives, and emancipating us from our evil.

Christ is the type, the mould into which men are to be cast. The Gospel, as presented in Scripture, gives us three things. It gives us the perfect mould; it gives us the perfect motive; it gives us the perfect power. And in all three things appears its distinctive glory, apart from and above all other systems that have ever tried to affect the conduct or to mould the character of man.

In Jesus Christ we have in due combination, in perfect proportion, all the possible excellences of humanity. As in other cases of perfect symmetry, the very precision of the balanced proportions detracts from the apparent magnitude of the statue or of the fair building, so to a superficial eye there is but little beauty there that we should desire Him, but as we learn to know Him, and live nearer to Him, and get more familiar with all His sweetness, and with all His power, He towers before us in ever greater and yet never repellent or exaggerated magnitude, and never loses the reality of His brotherhood in the completeness of His perfection. We have in the Christ the one type, the one mould and pattern for all striving, the glass of form, the perfect Man.

And that likeness is not reproduced in us by pressure or by a blow, but by the slow and blessed process of gazing until we become like, beholding the glory until we are changed into the glory.

It is no use having a mould and metal unless you have a fire. It is no use having a perfect Pattern unless you have a motive to copy it. Men do not go to the devil for want of examples; and morality is not at a low ebb by reason of ignorance of what the true type of life is. But nowhere but in the full-orbed teaching of the New Testament will you find a motive strong enough to melt down all the obstinate hardness of the northern iron of the human will, and to make it plastic to His hand. If we can say, He loved me and gave Himself for me then the sum of all morality, the old commandment that ye love one another receives a new stringency, and a fresh motive as well as a deepened interpretation, when His love is our pattern. The one thing that will make men willing to be like Christ is their faith that Christ is their Sacrifice and their Saviour. And sure I am of this, that no form of mutilated Christianity, which leaves out or falteringly proclaims the truth that Christ died on the Cross for the sins of the world, will ever generate heat enough to mould men's wills, or kindle motives powerful enough to lead to a life of growing imitation of and resemblance to Him. The dial may be all right, the hours most accurately marked in their proper places, every minute registered on the circle, the hands may be all right, delicately fashioned, truly poised, but if there is no main-spring inside, dial and hands are of little use, and a Christianity which says, Christ is the Teacher; do you obey Him? is as impotent as the dial face with the broken main-spring. What we need, and what, thank God, in the teaching we have, is the pattern brought near to us, and the motive for imitating the pattern, set in motion by the great thought, He loved me and gave Himself for me.

Still further, the teaching is a power to fashion life, inasmuch as it brings with it a gift which secures the transformation of the believer into the likeness of his Lord. Part of the teaching is the fact of Pentecost; part of the teaching is the fact of the Ascension; and the consequence of the Ascension and the sure promise of the Pentecost is that all who love Him, and wait upon Him, shall receive into their hearts the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus which shall make them free from the law of sin and death.

So, dear friends, on the one hand, let us remember that our religion is meant to work, that we have nothing in our creed that should not be in our character, that all our credenda are to be our agenda; everything believed to be something done; and that if we content ourselves with the simple acceptance of the teaching, and make no effort to translate that teaching into life, we are hypocrites or self-deceivers.

And, on the other hand, do not let us forget that religion is the soul of which morality is the body, and that it is impossible in the nature of things that you shall ever get a true, lofty, moral life which is not based upon religion. I do not say that men cannot be sure of the outlines of their duty without Christianity, though I am free to confess that I think it is a very maimed and shabby version of human duty, which is supplied, minus the special revelation of that duty which Christianity makes; but my point is, that the knowledge will not work without the Gospel.

The Christian type of character is a distinct and manifestly separate thing from the pagan heroism or from the virtues and the righteousnesses of other systems. Just as the musician's ear can tell, by half a dozen bars, whether that strain was Beethoven's, or Handel's, or Mendelssohn's, just as the trained eye can see Raffaelle's magic in every touch of his pencil, so Christ, the Teacher, has a style; and all the scholars of His school carry with them a certain mark which tells where they got their education and who is their Master, if they are scholars indeed. And that leads me to the last word.

**III. This mould demands obedience.**

By the very necessity of things it is so. If the teaching was but a teaching of abstract truths it would be enough to assent to them. I believe that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, and I have done my duty by that proposition when I have said Yes! it is so. But the teaching which Jesus Christ gives and is, needs a good deal more than that. By the very nature of the teaching, assent drags after it submission. You can please yourself whether you let Jesus Christ into your minds or not, but if you do let Him in, He will be Master. There is no such thing as taking Him in and not obeying.

And so the requirement of the Gospel which we call faith has in it quite as much of the element of obedience as of the element of trust. And the presence of that element is just what makes the difference between a sham and a real faith. Faith which has not works is dead, being alone. A faith which is all trust and no obedience is neither trust nor obedience.

And that is why so many of us do not care to yield ourselves to the faith that is in Jesus Christ. If it simply came to us and said, If you will trust Me you will get pardon, I fancy there would be a good many more of us honest Christians than are so. But Christ comes and says, Trust Me, follow Me, and take Me for your Master; and be like Me, and one's will kicks, and one's passions recoil, and a thousand of the devil's servants within us prick their ears up and stiffen their backs in remonstrance and opposition. Submit is Christ's first word; submit by faith, submit in love.

That heart obedience, which is the requirement of Christianity, means freedom. The Apostle draws a wonderful contrast in the context between the slavery to lust and sin, and the freedom which comes from obedience to God and to righteousness. Obey the Truth, and the Truth, in your obeying, shall make you free, for freedom is the willing submission to the limitations which are best. I will walk at liberty for I keep Thy precepts. Take Christ for your Master, and, being His servants, you are your own masters, and the world's to boot. For all things are yours if ye are Christ's. Refuse to bow your necks to that yoke which is easy, and to take upon your shoulders that burden which is light, and you do not buy liberty, though you buy licentiousness, for you become the slaves and downtrodden vassals of the world and the flesh and the devil, and while you promise yourselves liberty, you become the bondsmen of corruption. Oh! then, let us obey from the heart that mould of teaching to which we are delivered, and so obeying, we shall be free indeed.