

Theology for Beginners

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SPIRIT KNOWS, LOVES, IS POWERFUL

In theology, spirit is not only a key-word, it is *the* key-word. Our Lord said to the Samaritan woman, “God is a spirit.” Unless we know the meaning of the word spirit, we do not know what he said. It is as though He had said “God is a _____.” Which tells us nothing at all. The same is true of every doctrine; they all include spirit. In theology we are studying spirit all the time. And the mind with which we are studying it is a spirit too.

We simply must know what it is. And I don’t mean just a definition. We must master the idea, make it our own, learn to handle it comfortably and skillfully. That is why I shall dwell upon it rather lengthily here. Slow careful thinking ere will pay dividends later. This book is not planned as a hand-gallop over the field of revelation. It is an effort to reach the beginnings of theology.

We begin with our own spirit, the one we know best. Spirit is the element in us by which we know and love, by which therefore we decide. Our body *knows* nothing; it *loves* nothing (bodily pleasures are not enjoyed by the body; it reacts to them physically, with heightened pulse, for instance, or acid stomach; but it is the knowing mind that enjoys the reactions or dislikes them); the body *decides* nothing (though our will may decide in favor of things that give us bodily pleasure).

Spirit knows and loves. A slightly longer look at ourselves reveals that spirit has power, too. It is the mind of man that splits the atom; the atom cannot split the mind, it cannot even split itself, it does not know about its own electrons.

SPIRIT PRODUCES WHAT MATTER CANNOT

This mingling of spirit and matter in human actions arises from a fact which distinguishes man’s spirit from all others. Ours is the only spirit which is also a soul – that is to say the life principle in a body. God is a spirit, but has no body; the angels are spirits, but have no body. Only in man spirit is united in a body, animates the body, makes it to be a living body. Every living body – vegetable, lower animal, human – has a life principle, has a soul. And just as ours is the only spirit which is a soul, so ours is the only soul which is a

spirit. Later we shall be discussing the union of spirit and matter in man to see what light it sheds upon ourselves. But for the present our interest is in *spirit*.

We have seen that in us spirit does a number of things: it knows and loves, and it animates a body. But what, at the end of all this, is spirit?

We can get at it by looking into our own soul. Examining in particular one of the things that it does. It produces ideas...Our ideas are not material. They have no resemblance to our body. Their resemblance is to our spirit. They have no shape, no size, no color, no weight, no space. Neither has spirit whose offspring they are. But no one can call it nothing; for it produces thought, and thought is the most powerful thing in the world – unless love is, which spirit also produces.

A spirit differs from a material thing by having no parts. Once we have mastered the meaning of this, we are close to our goal... A part is any element in a being which is not the whole of it, as my chest is a part of my body, or an electron a part of an atom. A spirit has no parts. There is no element in it which is not the whole of it. There is no division of parts as there is in matter. Our body has parts, each with its own specialized function; it uses its lungs to breathe with, its eyes to see with, its legs to walk with. Our soul has no parts, for it is a spirit. There is no element in our soul which is not the whole soul. It does a remarkable variety of things – knowing, loving, animating a body – but each one of them is done by the whole soul; it has no parts among which to divide them up.

The trouble is that we find it hard to think of a thing existing if it is not in space, and we find it very hard to think of a thing acting if it has no parts. As against the first difficulty we must remind ourselves that space is merely emptiness, and emptiness can hardly be essential to existence. As against the second we must remind ourselves that parts are only divisions, and dividedness can hardly be an indispensable aid to action.

As against both we may be helped a little by thinking of one of our own commonest operations, the judgements we are all the time making. When in our mind we judge that in a given case mercy is more useful than justice, we hardly realize what a surprising thing we have done. We have taken three ideas or concepts, mercy, justice, and usefulness. We have found some kind of identity between mercy and usefulness: mercy is useful. This means that we must have got mercy and usefulness together in our mind. There can be no “distance” between the two concepts: if there were they could not be got together for comparison and judgement. If the mind were spread out as the brain is, with the concept mercy in one part of the mind, and the concept usefulness in the other, they would have to stay uncomparing. The concepts justice and usefulness must similarly be together and some identity affirmed between them, the judgement made that justice is useful. That is not all. All three concepts must be together, so that the superior usefulness of mercy can be affirmed. The power to make judgements is at the very root of man’s power to live and to develop in the mastery of himself and his environment. And the power to make judgements is dependent upon the partlessness of the soul: one single, undivided thinking principle to take hold of and hold in one all the concepts we wish to compare.