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The Apostolic Psha!

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Memory plays us scurvy tricks. I remember that Hilaire Belloc says somewhere that there are three things that a real man must be capable of saying. I remember also that the first one is: *Credo in unum Deum, Patrem omnipotentem*; and that the third one is: *Psha!* What the second one is, I have completely forgotten, a fact more irritating to my vanity than hurtful to the purpose of this study. For the line that runs from the first to the third, from the *Credo* to the *Psha!* is not so devious as it might at first glance appear to be. With the first we commit ourselves—totally, body and soul, heart, will, brain, and all—to the Almighty Father, the God of whom our Confessions speak in measured solemnity as *immensa potentia, sapientia, bonitate*. Now, if we are His, as we confess ourselves to be by His grace, the *Psha!* must inevitably follow: if we are His, there will be things that we shall have no time for; there will be attitudes and actions that we cannot stoop to; there will be a point at which a God-given impatience sets in, where we shall have to utter an Apostolic *Psha!* and proceed to more important matters.

There is no better example of this high and Apostolic impatience, this God-given *Psha!* than the words of St. Peter in the second chapter of Acts: "These men are not drunken, as ye suppose, seeing it is but the third hour of the day." St. Peter was too divinely busy, too Spirit-filled to launch into a heated and labored defense against such pasquinades as "These men are full of new wine." He rated such words at what they are worth, as the hysterical giggle with which men seek to hold firm their grasp on flat and mundane modes of existence when they are confronted with the miraculously Divine, as a frantic and scurrilous attempt to flee from the terribly numinous Presence. (King Agrippa once similarly tried to joke his way back to the daylight of his accustomed frivolity when the shadow of his fathers' God fell upon him in the words of St. Paul.) St. Peter was content to let one fact speak, not without some irony: "None but very hard and resolute drinkers," he says, "could be that drunk so early;—after all, it is only nine o'clock in the morning." And he turned him forthwith to that which was spoken by the Prophet Joel.

We have, it seems, become more thin-skinned than Our Lord's Apostles were. It is time to remind ourselves that we must muster up the courage for a devout *Psha!* upon occasion. We must not be too

diligent about erasing every scrawl that appears on the wall ecclesiastical. We need not rise with anguished yelp and energy-consuming indignation at every mangy screed, for instance, that defames Luther or the Lutherans. The time is short; there is not always time for the hard-breathing and heavy-handed rebuttal, with footnotes. A sentence or two, a brace of facts — and let the rest be silence. Our Lord was silent, dreadfully silent, sometimes too, and there were questions that He would not answer. And we shall do well to remember that *He* is building His Church, on a rock, and of such stuff that it shall prevail against graver thrusts than any that these small, unsavory assailants can deliver. The Church is an anvil that has worn out many hammers, and we ought not expend too much energy on puny smithikins that with contemptible hammerlets pelt its brazen solidity. No Church, not even one with a most amply-staffed department of public relations, has time for spiritual calisthenics; we have real battles to fight and satanically ineluctable struggles to engage in each day. These little slingers and darters are part of His Majesty the Devil's forces, no doubt; but they can succeed only by creating a diversion, in the military sense. Where they are ignored, they fail.

There is some of this same energetic impatience, this noble disdain in St. Paul too. The same stinging and refreshing salt spray is in the air that blows from his pages: "Neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions rather than godly edifying." St. Paul rose to do battle when the need to do battle arose, and he wrestled in agony and travail for the truth of God; but there were theologies that he did not deem worthy of an *Auseinandersetzung*; there were "problems" that he had not the time to discuss, simply because they did not lead to "godly edifying." If the practitioners of such theologies and the excogitators of such problems turned aside to "vain jangling," that was bad enough; he would not abet, or have Timothy abet, their aberrancy by "jangling" with them. One wonders, incidentally, how much patience St. Paul would have with our "periodical" type of theologian — the kind that reads all the periodicals regularly and some of Scriptures periodically. "Refuse profane and old wives' fables, and exercise thyself unto godliness." Not woman's myths, but man's work is the business of the man of God, of the theologian. I am reminded of Stauffer's annihilating criticism of Bultmann in the *Deutsches Pfarrerblatt* of October 1, 1949 — reminded not only by the word "myth" but also by the whole tone of that criticism, itself a good example of the Apostolic *Psha!*, and by the emphasis on *work*. Stauffer draws up his artillery, fifteen

batteries of it, and with some Staufferian pyrotechnics, but without frivolity, trains all his guns on the hapless Bultmann, prepared, apparently, to demolish him on all counts: "Nun kann das Schieszen beginnen. . . . Aber wir beginnen nicht. Denn wir haben unsere Freude nicht am Schieszen, sondern am Arbeiten." There is the heart of Apostolic impatience, for the theologian: there is so much work to do, so much real, glorious work for us to labor at that the endless discussion of postulates and prolegomena seems by comparison a fussy sort of idleness. We turn in weariness from all the bright new books, and the glory seems gone from our vocation; theology seems almost a burden. We wish that we could dig with our hands, or shear sheep, or chop wood, thank God for each simple day as it passes, and sleep at night. But then we turn from books to the Book, from concepts and thoughts and ideas to the reality of God at work for us; we become as little children again, and the kingdom of God, the grace and mercy of God, the love of God, the righteousness of God, the peace of God, loom large before our eyes once more; the mists dissolve, and the everlasting and unshaken hills of our help appear once more. The drums of God roll, His trumpets call from golden throats, His cavalcade is on the way, the hooves of His horses strike fire on the world's rough ways, His angels hasten and cry out, "Make way! Make way!" We see it, we feel it; no, by some miracle, by some incomprehensible condescension of the King, we are in it. We ride. Caparisoned as no rider ever was, with sword and buckler, with helmet and plume, and with all the panoply of God, we ride. And as we ride, we pass a little lens-grinder's shop; and this lens-grinder is a very cunning man; he can give us a pair of spectacles that will enable us to stand by and see God's cavalcade "in an entirely new perspective." But a *Psha!* to you, Master Theological Lens-grinder; we have no time to stand and watch the cavalcade—we are in it. And a *Psha!* upon your "new perspective" too. For God's perspective is His own, and He gives it to His own without spectacles. For God moves, and only those who are moved by Him and move with Him can see Him as He would and must be seen, in His eternal and ever-new perspective. And what a sight it is from where we move with Him: we see all the sin-wrenched and sin-smirched fragments of our world brought back, renewed, restored in Christ by God's sure and almighty hand; we see the broken fractions of the world that we destroyed gathered up and made a perfect sum once more in Christ, the Denominator who in God's tremendous mathematics gives a place and a value to all things. But there is more, and though we can give but a cold and stammered account of it, our eyes catch a glimpse of it, and our ears

catch an echo of it, as amid the fearful lightnings of God's judgment and the gladsome crashing of His grace the new world rises up before our eyes, the new heavens and the new earth, where God's angels and God's redeemed thunder forth unending Alleluias and all God's little birds enter into the glorious liberty of the sons of God and sing in Paradisal freedom once more.

From such heights we must come down; but we come down with glory upon us, and we cannot but say *Psha!* to many things. So, by way of example, a *Psha!* to thin-blooded and rheumy-eyed philosophy; and a *Psha!* to prestige in all its forms—we count it dung; a *Psha!* to great men who say nice things about the Bible, deeming it a great source of ethical inspiration, valuable for the maintenance of good government and a free society, and a fine thing all around; a *Psha!* to all publicity that makes the Church look like a huckster selling a competitive product, like soap; a *Psha!* to theological gobbledegook that sicklies o'er the Good News with the pale cast of thought; and a stout Isaianic *Psha!* to all idols, including all our own twentieth-century varieties, the respectable ones.

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