

RELIGION: ITS MODERN NEEDS
AND PROBLEMS . . . No. 12

**ESSENTIAL CHRISTIANITY AND
THE PRESENT RELIGIOUS
SITUATION**

**BY
LAWRENCE REDFERN**

M.A., B.D.

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RELIGION: ITS MODERN NEEDS AND PROBLEMS

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Each writer is responsible for the views expressed in his contribution to the series. No attempt has been made to limit freedom in the effort to impose an artificial uniformity. Yet a certain unity of outlook does make itself evident, and this is all the more valuable because unforced.

RAYMOND V. HOLT

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To-day there is an undermining of old foundations and a consequent bewilderment. The hearts of men are filled with Fear and Hope. But the spirit of Religion is still strong in spite of the weakness of its institutions. The causes of unrest are manifold. The war and the changed intellectual outlook that followed the war is one of the chief causes. Orthodoxy has passed into a critical phase. But there are elements of hope in the situation. Men have caught a new vision of the meaning of Christianity.

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There is an age-long distinction between authoritative religion and the religion of the free spirit. To-day that distinction is more apparent, owing to the growth of the evolutionary conception of life and thought. This conception has had a profound effect upon Religion in general and Christianity in particular. In the course of history the Christian message has been modified by the forces of the world. It is the dominant task of our age to discover the essential elements in the Christian gospel.

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ESSENTIAL CHRISTIANITY AND THE PRESENT RELIGIOUS SITUATION

CHAPTER I

THE PRESENT RELIGIOUS SITUATION

MANY circumstances combine to make the present hour one of challenge to religious faith and conviction. Our lot is cast in a day of grave perplexities when the foundations of man's spiritual life seem to be tottering, and there is a tragic sense in the hearts of many that the things which they thought and believed were eternally secure are going the way of all perishable and transitory things.

Again and again we are reminded of the passage in the *Pilgrim's Progress* where the Interpreter says to Christian, "Hast thou considered all these things?" and Christian answers, "Yes, and they put me in fear and hope."

There are large numbers of people to-day who look at the present religious situation, at the widespread decline in the church-going habits of the people, the attitude of indifference towards the Church, and the amiable paganism of their brethren, and—seeing all these things—are stricken with fear.

But is there no treasure of hope to be discovered at the bottom of the casket? Is there nothing to put on the other side of the account? Is it altogether foolish and quixotic to maintain that while the present forms of institutional religion may be weak, the spirit of religion is strong and

hopeful, and that a religious Renaissance may be close at hand, both in the church and in the community?

No doubt there are many causes which have led up to the present religious situation. First and foremost, there was the war with its challenge to old moral and religious sanctions, when our Christian Faith seemed to suffer a moratorium and to fail in its mission and witness as a follower of him who was the Prince of Peace. But even here the story is not all loss. Those dread years of conflict, while seeming to discredit the Christian Church as an organised institution, did a great deal to stimulate the quest for reality. They challenged, with their terrible realism, some of the conventional platitudes of the church. They made men think more deeply of some of the great realities of the religious life—God, Providence, Free-Will, Immortality. They sent men down to the fundamental things. They opened men's eyes to the peril and danger of unchristian motives and ambitions. They brought home the need of applying the Christian Faith to social, political and international life. They challenged men to investigate anew the practical meaning and value of Christianity as a principle of world conduct.

Our progress in education, and the intellectual advance of the past fifty years, has also brought about significant changes. Many of our old notions, dearly cherished, are being proved fallacious, and are ruthlessly discarded. Many old accepted theories in the realm of thought, and science, and philosophy, on which men had formerly built their lives and established their happiness, are being discredited and shovelled out into the back-yards and lumber-rooms of obsolescence. A new spirit is in the air and a new philosophy is captivating men's minds; a new interpretation of life and of man's place in the world is gradually emerging into articulate form. The scientific spirit of the new age is not unfavourable to religion. Science is certainly more modest than were its camp-followers fifty years ago, and science

and faith are on much better terms. The soul to-day cannot find its needs satisfied or its intuitions answered by science, and when science has said all that it has to say, its last word is still that of Tyndall and Huxley in its earlier dawn—the one word—MYSTERY.

But these changes in the world of thought and knowledge have brought their own problems to the Church. The theological world is one of conflicting voices and confusions. Orthodox theology has passed into a critical phase. It is reluctant to adapt itself to new intellectual conditions, slow to reclothe its faith in forms that are intellectually satisfying. It tries vainly to cling to old theories and old ways of expressing them, and therefore alienates serious and thoughtful people. On the other hand, if an attempt is made to readjust the old faith, some earnest and devoted souls are profoundly disturbed. The old seems breaking down, the new is not yet built. The messages of the Orthodox Church are conflicting and uncertain and are characterised by compromise, hesitation and obscurantism. Some of her most distinguished sons are painfully aware of this. From her "intellectual truth has been almost drained," says the Dean of St. Paul's. "Half the attendants of our Churches are enfeebled in spiritual life; they entertain a suspicion that what they hear from the pulpit is not true," adds Bishop Gore.

Now all this appears very depressing, and it is difficult sometimes for even the most incorrigible optimist to prevent the spirit of heaviness from showing through the garment of praise. But we believe that it will be an injustice both to our own time, and to ourselves, if we fail to penetrate to the deeper and more enduring elements in its consciousness, or to fail in our interpretation of its discontents and distresses. It is our conviction that "Truth will heal the wounds which Truth herself doth make."

Reason in the long run will purify and strengthen the

permanent and abiding elements in the Christian Faith. It is our conviction that all this disintegration and dissolution is the result of the activity in the minds of men of the same eternal Spirit of Truth as gave us the great thoughts and ideals of the past.

Man's spirit is still ardently seeking for the truth, still striving for the highest good, still storming "the secret Beauty of the World."

Sooner or later, the new elements, which at the moment seem to operate adversely on our church life and solidarity, will bring a new vision of Christian life and idealism to our churches, and heal those divisions which come from misunderstanding and imperfect knowledge.

And at the end it will be found that God has written a new chapter of revelation for His people. At any rate, of one thing we may be sure—a new vision has come to the churches—not to all churches, nor to all the people who belong to them—but to all whose faces are set towards the sunrise, and who believe in the prophetic rather than the dogmatic mission of the church.

They at any rate have realised essential Christianity more clearly than it has been conceived for ages, and they will refuse to be separated by the boundaries of sect and creed. It is a day of spiritual renaissance, and those who labour in this day are privileged to set the tone and temper for the generations to come.

CHAPTER II

THE PASSING AND THE PERMANENT

THROUGHOUT the whole course of religious history there has run one fundamental distinction in the religious forces of the world. It is a distinction between those who accept religion as something unchanging and authoritative, a faith once and for all delivered to the Saints, and those who feel that religion is something free and flexible, ever being vitalised and reshaped through fresh visions and experiences. That is not only the real and persistent division, but one that is natural and inevitable, because religion is the child of both permanence and change. "No religion," it has been said, "can live and be a power in an evolving world unless it changes and adapts itself to its environment, and no religion can minister to the deep needs of men unless it reveals permanent and time-transcending realities."

When men are timid grown and thoughtless and indifferent, then official religion emphasises the conventional and static elements, and tends to become reactionary and dogmatic. But whenever men think vigorously and independently, then liberty of conscience and the right of private judgment are asserted and religion becomes dynamic and prophetic.

Under *authority* religion works from without inwards. Under *freedom* religion works from within outwards. Its worship is spontaneous and not formal, its message is prophetic and not traditional.

In our own day this division between authority and freedom has become more and more apparent, and an ever-

widening gulf is opening between the adherents of a static type of theology and those who follow the open way. It is an age-long conflict, though never so acute as now. All down the ages, through all the theological diversities and ecclesiastical systems of the world have flowed the currents of a vital spiritual religion, dependent not on books or church councils or creeds, but on the direct and intimate consciousness of a divine presence and guidance, a first-hand experience of Eternal Realities.

All down the ages there have been those who have sought to maintain religious fellowship without any rigid ecclesiastical system, without any dogmatic exclusiveness, but simply by an insistence upon the spirit of the gospel and the unity which is created by the common possession of "good-news." They have insisted upon two things—the essential unity of those who are united in the spirit of Christianity, and secondly, the fundamental importance of truth in the religious life.

They have maintained, and they still maintain, that what man knows and thinks and believes, what he is profoundly and sincerely convinced of and utterly loyal to, is the sacred concern of his inner life, and that the inner life gives shape and form to the outer life. And inasmuch as theology relates to these inner things, and is in fact made up of a man's deepest thoughts and feelings about them, it is essentially a human interest in which truth must be the first and only consideration.

Now during the past half-century the evolutionary conception of life and thought, of the world and the universe, has taken possession of educated minds everywhere. Under its influence religion is being explained and appreciated in a new and clearer light, and all our social institutions are being understood and appraised from new and larger points of view. Taken all in all, it constitutes the greatest enrichment of human learning that the world has known. It

makes the world of our time more wonderful and inspiring than former generations ever dreamed.

In the light of this conception we see how religions have grown and changed with changing times and civilisations, rising from the crudest superstitions to the most enlightened and noble ethics and spirituality. We see the Bible no longer as a "miraculous collection of miraculous books," but as a library of books composed at many different times, and under widely different circumstances, and exhibiting not uniformity, but diversity and progress; the spontaneous expression of the ruling ideas and convictions which possessed its writers at different stages in the unfolding life of the race, as vital and inspired as the noblest poetry and preaching in the world. In the light of this conception of development, we get a thrilling vision in the Bible of the vital power of religion.

When we turn to the New Testament we perceive with fresh interest the growth and development of the teaching of Jesus from the Judaism into which he was born. In the synoptic gospels we have incomplete and fragmentary sketches of that wonderful life with certain interpretations and constructions put upon incident and event, not always the same in each gospel, and in the fourth gospel differing most of all.

And yet, taken all together, we get a vivid composite picture of this Jesus of Nazareth. Nowhere are things definitely, precisely and finally determined for us, and the interpretations of the significance of that life are not always the same. But behind the recorded facts and sayings and incidents, there is revealed a spirit which has been one of the most vital, emancipating and redeeming forces in the history of the world. That spirit is the fundamental thing in the religion which Christ preached, and the possession of that spirit the vital thing in any Christian discipleship.

Unfortunately, as the Christian movement spread and

became a more elaborated and organised thing, more and more emphasis was placed upon the letter of the gospel to the neglect of the spirit. It came into close and prolonged contact with Greek philosophy and Greek political and social usages, and was profoundly influenced by them. From these and other associations it emerged in the great historic creeds with a metaphysical character deeply impressed upon it. It was embroiled in the turbulent world-politics of the Roman Empire, from which it suffered a pronounced modification. It was embraced by St. Augustine, who put the stamp of his mighty individuality upon it with his ideas of a fallen race, a ruined world and everlasting punishment and of the Church as a City of Refuge. Then the Roman Church arose in its splendour and carried this elaboration still further in the direction of establishing her ecclesiastical absolutism, and for a thousand years imposed it upon the nations of Europe.

Officialism became of paramount importance, bishops became politicians and statesmen, and servants of the Church men of the world, who were appointed not so much for the proclamation of "good-news" as for the maintenance and development of a mighty institutionalism.

What a contrast! And how far has the world roamed from the simplicity that was in Christ! Not without good reason do men draw a distinction between traditional Christianity and the religion of Christ, between the ritual and dogma of the later centuries and the vital spiritual message of the Galilean days. The latter is indeed a gospel, "a good tidings of great joy" to comfort and guide and redeem heart-hungry men. The former is a scheme of ideas for intellectual disputants and a philosophical programme for the builders of a mighty institution.

And in days like these when Christianity is so deeply implicated in our whole Western civilisation, and that civilisation is placed upon its trial by reason of the cataclysm

which threatens to engulf it, there are many who are impelled to examine afresh the Christian Faith, to ask what is valid in its claims, and to separate the kernel from the husk in historic Christianity. Has Christianity been a failure and are the defects of our civilisation due to its inadequacy and inefficiency? Or has it never been really tried on a sufficient scale to enable us justly to determine its value?

And before these questions can be answered, we must first of all ascertain what is essential Christianity and to what extent it has been rightly understood. It may be said with some confidence, that much that has come down to us under the name of Christianity is not Christian at all, either in the sense of having been taught by Jesus, or in the sense of being necessarily implied by his teaching, or in the sense of being reasonable and true.

If there have been many "false Christs," there have been also many false followers of the true Christ. If there has been a sound core of genuine valid and holy teaching at the heart of Christianity, there has been built up around it an immense body of spurious doctrine.

And the task which has devolved upon our age, and which has increased in magnitude and thoroughness and value as crisis has succeeded crisis in our common life, is that of severing truth from error, the kernel from the husk, in historical Christianity.

The task is still far from accomplishment, but is in process of being accomplished in many ways and by many hands in all branches of the Christian Church—by patient scholars and thinkers, by humble teachers and preachers, and by a vast multitude of those whose only means of proving what is true and what is false is in the great school of experience. No scholar so great and none so humble, no disciple so prominent and none so inconspicuous but he may have a part in this great sifting process of our time.

By this process, widespread, thorough, patient and pro-

longed, we shall come to know the truth and the truth shall make us free. No papal decrees, no ecclesiastical councils, no creeds or confessions of faith can finally determine this question for us. It is a question for thought and learning, and above all, for the cultivated consciousness of good men and the growing spiritual experience of mankind. In the last analysis everything must rest back upon the soul of man, to which truth and right and love and beauty must make their appeal upon their own merit. There is ultimately no escape from the peril and the glory of bringing every subject to the bar of the human mind and heart, for the ascertainment, as far as the finite powers of apprehension can ascertain, of what is true and right and beautiful and good. If we cannot exercise such powers and pass such judgment, we can do nothing but follow as we are led and do in all things as we are told.

CHAPTER III

THE CHRIST OF THE GOSPELS

Now, in our search for essential Christianity, we turn first of all to the Gospel narrative and we bring everything to the judgment-seat of Christ. He must be our primary and principal criterion for determining what essential Christianity is. We are not concerned with what the creeds have said, or what ecclesiastical councils have decided—these no doubt have a great historic interest. But we are concerned with what Christ was and said and did; and the spirit which he manifested in all that he said and did. This must be regarded as the heart and soul of Christianity.

Here was a teacher, humble, reverent and heavenly-minded, who came into the world to proclaim a gospel which was indeed "good-news." He claimed for himself neither perfection nor infallibility. He went about doing good, inculcating high and holy lessons, instilling the most beautiful and blessed principles of life and conduct ever known among men, and himself exemplifying them with wondrous fidelity and sweetness. There was a happy and impressive balance between the things which were resolutely taught and the things which were quietly and beautifully done. He gathered around him twelve men to be his disciples, and they were with him on the big and the little occasions. He lived with them in the sweet and humble mysticism of human friendship.

He taught them and educated them and exercised an uplifting and sanctifying influence upon them. Then after convincing them that he was the Christ and leaving them

to an earnest acknowledgment of their faith in him as such, he died a cruel death on the Cross and left his sublime cause in their hands with no other organisation than a common spiritual experience as their bond of union with him as their Lord and Master.

In his wandering ministry he showed a compassionate sympathy towards the poor, the unfortunate and the distressed, and on occasion was severe in his censure of the hard-hearted, the cruel and the hypocritical.

He taught the doctrine of God's Fatherhood, of His nearness and dearness, His absolute Holiness and Love. He set no limits to man's sonship to God and implied therefore the brotherhood of mankind. For him righteousness was the supreme law of life and love its supreme motive. He taught men how to pray, how to trust and obey God, how to love Him and serve their fellows. He called them to repentance and forgiveness, to simplicity and sincerity, to the joys of a pure and benevolent life, to worship in spirit and in truth. He simply affirmed the great cardinal truths of his message and left them to make their own impression without dogmatic restraints or ecclesiastical safeguards, and he himself was the finest exemplification of the things he taught.

He taught that a man's highest conception of life was determined by two things—by his thought about the Divine Power which created the world, and by his thought of those who shared life with him here; in other words, by his attitude towards God and his attitude towards Man. This high conception of life was constantly overclouded and its gladness marred by one thing—Fear.

Fear was the great enemy of mankind, and he would cast it out by faith in that goodness of love which seemed everywhere to pervade the world. He saw life illumined and transfigured by the light of God's presence. Over and within all the miseries and wrongs of life, he felt the presence

of an Eternal Power which to him was an Eternal Goodness. The pure radiance of Divine Love illumined even the darkest places of the world with its mystic and marvellous light.

In the same way he looked upon the hearts of men. He saw them not merely as they are now, but as they may become and as they already are in the mind of God. He saw men as friends and lovers and comrades. On the surface of things they were a troubled and contentious race, selfish and self-seeking, often envious, petulant and pitiless, marring their own and others' happiness by strife and covetousness and cruelty. And yet beneath and beyond the outer forms and manners of daily life they were sons of God and heirs of Eternal Life. These simple, commonplace folk, erring and wayward, restless and troubled, wandering and unhappy "like sheep without a shepherd," were his own kith and kin, his own human brothers. There was in Jesus this passion of fellowship, the abiding sense of a common spiritual nature with all men, on which love and brotherhood might be built.

And though men strove with one another and hurt and spoiled each other's lives and went forth to slay and be slain, it was all the result of this common enemy of fear—fear of one another, fear of losing their possessions, fear of life, fear of death. If only they could be emancipated from this deep overawing shadow of fear, and their sense of values turned upside down, the evils that afflicted them would be seen to be on the surface, while deep down the love that united them would be mighty and restless, and, set free, would become the ruling and exultant spirit of life. The word which dominated his message more than any other was the word Life. The aspect of humanity which seemed most to impress him was its weariness, its lack of joyousness, its slow and heavy-laden step. He was astonished far less by what men suffered than by what men missed, and he made it his mission to bring to them a richer and more abundant life. He was, as William

Blake said, "the Bright Preacher of Life." "In him was life," an intense, vivid, palpitating life, and his dominating passion was to live, and to help others to live abundantly. He was possessed by this passion because his deepest springs of being assured him that he had been sent into the world by his Father, the great, compassionate loving God of all, to be an inspirer and quickener of life. He did not lay down rules or prescribe in detail just how this thing should be brought to pass. Live your life on all sides and be what you were made to be, but remember that the good alone is life, and evil is death! Work because work is divine, and for it man is fitted! Indolence is deadness. Consider the lilies and every other lovely thing, because indifference to beauty is a form of death. Love, because love is living just as hatred is dying. Exercise your powers, develop your talents, sow your seed and sow it everywhere. Have courage, hope, faith, love, life.

That is the gospel message. Christianity in its essence is the living of a life, the kindling of a fire, the ever-fresh kindling and fanning of a flame until it becomes a burning passion of unconquerable life. Children are the pattern of the Christian life because they have not begun to die. They are alive, active, eager, fulfilling the will of God. Men and women are Christians when they are like that, dedicating their all to the service of God. The worst sins are sluggishness, intolerance, half-heartedness, prejudice. These things mean death. Christianity is full, creative, many-sided life. Its virtues are diligence, courage, enthusiasm, life. Its enemies are sloth, cowardice, weakness, death.

And this life which Jesus came to bring was not a fretful or feverish thing. When he saw such fretfulness he pointed to the lily whose beauty was untroubled by care. The lily does not toil, yet it is not idle. It does the thing it was meant to do. It lives out the law of its life, fulfils the reason for being. Even so man must live out the law of his life,

seeking the Kingdom of Heaven as naturally as the lily seeks the light and air. Jesus preached that the highest life is the natural life. Marcus Aurelius lived a spiritual life in a palace. Simplicity is not a matter of things, but of spirit and an inner attitude towards things. Life becomes simpler when we put first things first. "If thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light." All confusion yields, and yields instinctively, to the heart that keeps its simple humanity. It strikes a note which resolves all discords, and blends them in a more wondrous harmony. Its sympathy finds its way through the most complicated tangle, and leads right into the heart of reality. It gathers the confused host of baffled and weary workers around it, and gives them the heart and soul and leadership for which they have been longing. That was the simplicity that was in Christ. It was the power of the single eye, an inner resourcefulness and vigour which met fairly, and fairly conquered, the confusing forces of life. It was thus that Christ bade us seek first the Kingdom of Heaven.

In that Kingdom, God rules not by force but by love. In that spiritual realm there is indeed no order that stands on superior might, but there is the far higher order made by higher wisdom, a wider goodness and a deeper love. There love is king, and it is the only king the spirit knows, and by living under such divine authority men and women realise not only a joyous but a solemn sense of the liberty wherewith Christ has made them free.

In that Kingdom is to be found the abundant life—rich, overflowing and unending. As Bergson said, it moves like a cavalry charge, overriding even death. For one who lives this life, Eternity is now, Heaven is here, and Death a great adventure. Length of days does not signify: intensity of life is what counts, radiance of faith, richness of love, and fellowship with him who rose above the tyranny of time.

Such—as we are able to interpret them—were the impli-

cations of the gospel which Christ preached. Such was the vision which shone for his clear spirit radiant and beautiful as the dawn. That was the ideal preached in words of matchless simplicity and power, and embodied in life with fearless and unfaltering resolve. And though it has never yet been realised in the world, though the centuries have rolled by, and the old strife and struggle for that which is not joy has gone on and is going on still, yet the Christ ideal still lives and cannot die. And towards it in every age the hearts of the lowly and the loving turn as to the highest, sweetest and noblest wisdom that ever ravished the heart or anointed the lips of man.

CHAPTER IV

THE APOSTLE PAUL AND ESSENTIAL CHRISTIANITY

IF the foregoing pages have given anything like a faithful and true account of the essential teaching of the founder of our faith, it will be agreed that the essence of that teaching must be sought not in the "letter" but in the "spirit," and that they are to be accounted his disciples and followers who strive to live in the same spirit. That is essential Christianity. It is the only test by which the true disciple may be judged.

If we carry our investigation a stage further and take a casual glimpse at the life and teaching of the great apostle Paul, we shall find that with him too Christian discipleship is placed upon no narrower foundation.

It is one of the strange ironies of religious history that the apostle Paul, who devoted so much thought and energy to the defence of religious freedom, has come to be regarded as the apostle of a strict and rigid orthodoxy, and that he who eloquently pleaded the cause of universal and impartial divine love should have been quoted as upholding a system of limited salvation.

Into the causes that have led up to this strange inversion we cannot enter except to say that the root cause of this misunderstanding of Paul's mission and message is itself due to that slavery to the letter and disregard of the spirit against which he persistently pleads in words of burning eloquence.

Certain passages and phrases from the epistles of more or less ambiguous import, certain conceptions borrowed from

the Rabbinical schools to form the scaffolding and outwork of Paul's thought, have been seized upon as the most permanent structure of his system; while his profoundest and most original convictions, his large and splendid superiority to all those petty convictions which sectarianism loves, have been overlooked and disregarded.

Paul's whole conflict was with the exclusiveness and externality of Judaism, which could never be the highest expression of the religious spirit. Was the old covenant concluded with Moses the only one which could save the world? Was there in the purposes of God a chosen people, and was this divine choice limited to those who would submit to the letter of an ancient code, cramp the expanding powers of the soul and stifle every original impulse with the dead weight of a dreary and decrepit routine? Had not Jesus come to supersede the religion of the letter with the religion of the spirit—a spirit working in the hearts of men and raising them to the divine consciousness of sonship to God? Was not religion something inward rather than outward?

These were the questions Paul faced. This was the conflict in which his dauntless spirit was engaged, and by his victory in that conflict he entered into the great birthright of freedom. For him the Christ within abolished the tyranny of the law without.

And it is an amazing irony that the authority of no less an apostle of freedom than Paul should have been quoted to support those very dogmatic principles and externalities against which he strove with heart and mind and strength. Let us take one example.

The Corinthian Church, it will be remembered, had fallen into an unhappy controversy about questions on which they should have held no dispute, and Paul wrote them a memorable letter. One section was of Paul and another of Apollos, and they were wrangling as to whether it were better to belong

to this party or that. With that large magnanimity which characterised all his thought, Paul refused to enter at all into the merits of the question. Let one be of Paul and another of Apollos; both were alike followers of Christ and it did not matter through what subordinate minister they were brought into the Christian fold. He himself, he said, when he was among them, kept all such matters in the background. He would let no small difference between himself and others interfere with his preaching. He had determined not to know anything, while he was with them, save Jesus Christ. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."

In other words, the Christian Church is composed of those who desire to acknowledge themselves as being followers and disciples of Christ by trying to live in his spirit. Other things are of secondary importance if with true reverence they look to Christ as the exemplar of what human life should be. All other matters can wait while the soul tries to enter into his spirit of love and good-will.

And who will dare to say that when the soul is caught up into a divine communion, when in moments of stillness and meditation it lays itself open before God that He may quicken its better life, and cleanse away its sin; when a burning love of righteousness is kindled within and its desires and hopes, freed from the trammels of earth, are fixed on the Eternal—who will dare to say that that soul has missed the essentials of religion because it will allow no external power to dominate its conscience or its thought? Or who that has ever felt, in some great moment of life, the Spirit's power, can admit that one who is a stranger to that spirit of holiness that was in Christ, and has been in many of his disciples since, is really a Christian, no matter how punctilious he may be about the services of his Church or her ritual or her dogma?

It is the height of all imaginable folly to suppose that concerning a thing so complex and many-sided as human life all men can think alike! Intellectual differences arise as

soon as men begin to emerge from the very lowest stages of intelligence. It is in no case desirable that all should hold the same creed. It is, on the other hand, in every way right and proper that each one, seeing the world from his special point of view, should report honestly that partial glimpse of infinite truth which he has obtained.

But it is equally essential, if we are to be true to the Spirit of Christ, that a man shall not be proscribed for his creed, but shall be received in any household of faith on his merits as a Christian disciple and not on the colour of his beliefs.

People will go inevitably where their intellectual sympathies lead them. But one supreme duty rests upon all Churches which bear the name of Christ—to reproduce in the life of the world that spiritual quality which was in him. That is the essence of the Christian Faith.

The one distinctive purpose for which the Christian Church exists is to enable men to realise the beauty and power of that life. And if any church or any individual takes up a position which virtually says that no matter how Christ-like a man may be in life and character, he is unfit to be reckoned among Christ's followers, unless he professes certain opinions far outside the realm of human proof, can it be seriously maintained that this is a position of which the Master himself would approve? Holiness and saintliness of character must always claim the sympathy and fellowship of him who has caught the real spirit of Christianity, no matter in what Church or in what age that saintliness manifests itself. Wherever it may bloom, the true disciple of Christ will recognise in it a heavenly flower planted by the hand of God to adorn with its beauty and scent with its fragrance the desolate and sinful ways of the world.

That, in essence, was the attitude of the great apostle. He had been emancipated from an oppressive bondage into freedom, and his passionate nature exulted in the liberty which he had found in Christ. He had found something

which made life positive and vigorous and effective. Of course this new life in Christ which St. Paul had found had to be vindicated and commended, its moral and spiritual appeal had to be reinforced by argument and expressed in terms of theology.

But always it was the living spirit of Christ in him which was the essence of the new way of life. "The grandeur of the Epistle to the Romans," says Canon C. E. Raven, "lies not in its formulæ, which like all metaphors are often inadequate, but in its passionate testimony to the reality of Jesus and to the power of His love, given and returned, to lift us out of obsession with ourselves into fellowship with Him and with one another."¹

For Paul, religious experience signified emancipation. He was so inspired by the thought of Christian freedom, that the word had no single meaning. The total meaning of it seemed to gather in volume as the days passed. And when from the Roman prison he wrote his letter to the Philippians, once again he recalled his liberty to serve Christ with a calm exultant joy. He was not like the dull captive eagle that wearily sits and blinks and pines from hour to hour for the mountain crags and the great broad sweep of the sky, that longs to spread its wings and soar with unabashed eye toward the sun. Like John Bunyan in Bedford Gaol, the prison held his body but his spirit was wandering among the Delectable Mountains and tramping the streets of the Celestial City. "He has paid the full cost," writes Canon Raven, "and been glad to pay it; and in the certainty of what he has gained, his inward struggles (testimony always to repressed ambition and anxiety) have ceased. He no longer reckons himself to have attained, but is content to press on, rejoicing in God, in his friends, and in the pursuit of all things pure and honest and of good report. Joy breathes from every line of the Epistle. To read it is to discover

¹ *Jesus and the Gospel of Love*, p. 318.

how defective is the criticism which limits Paulinism to the soul-searchings and despair, the dualism and the scheme of salvation that can be found in the Romans. And having entered into the peace of God which lies deeper than all intellectual effort, he is nearer to the spirit of Jesus than at any earlier phase of his career. The Beatitudes have nowhere been more perfectly illustrated.”¹

No interpretation of Paul's thought will do justice to the facts which does not begin by recognising that for him the truth of the gospel means “the freedom wherewith Christ hath made us free.”

His was a religion of the spirit and not a religion of law. Independent and individualistic as his teaching appears, this founder of Churches never overlooked the needs of fellowship. But the fellowship was to be a bond of union in the spirit of Christ. “For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty: only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh but by love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.”

¹ *Jesus and the Gospel of Love*, p. 319.

CHAPTER V

THE RELIGION OF THE SPIRIT, THEOLOGY AND CHRISTIAN UNITY

It has been pointed out in a previous chapter that Christianity is not and never has been static. Rather it has been and still is free, spontaneous, vital, adaptable. It is not inherently a religion of the letter but of the spirit; it is creative, progressive, appropriative; it accepts and incorporates truth, goodness, beauty and love wherever and however found: it grows, it spreads, it develops; it is not the same yesterday, to-day and for ever. And it may be asked not unreasonably, whether all that body of Christian dogma and doctrine which we have called traditional Christianity, as distinct from essential Christianity, was not an inevitable development in the great Christian movement.

No one who has read Dr. Hatch's *Hibbert Lectures*, in which he makes the famous comparison between the Sermon on the Mount and the Nicene Creed, can fail to be impressed by that contrast. “It is impossible for anyone, whether he be a student of history or no, to fail to notice a difference of both form and content between the Sermon on the Mount and the Nicene Creed. The Sermon on the Mount is the promulgation of a new law of conduct: it assumes beliefs rather than formulates them, the theological conceptions which underlie it belong to the ethical rather than the speculative side of theology: metaphysics are wholly absent. The Nicene Creed is a statement partly of historical facts and partly of dogmatic inferences; the metaphysical terms which it contains would probably have been unin-

telligible to the first disciples; ethics have no place in it. The one belongs to a world of Syrian peasants, the other to a world of Greek philosophers."

And when the question is asked, how this remarkable change came about, Dr. Hatch finds the answer in the contact between the Christian movement and the influence of Greek thought.

The Greek philosopher, becoming a convert to Christianity, was bound to philosophise, to interpret and analyse his faith in terms of current philosophy. He could not be as simple-minded as the Syrian peasant in his thought, and he had every right to express his faith on its intellectual side, with the help of the philosophical ideas which dominated the thinking of his time.

The Christian philosophers brought up in the Greek tradition were within their rights and were indeed rendering a notable service in their attempt to adjust the Christian faith to the best thought of their generation. They were only going beyond their rights when they claimed that their conclusions had reached finality.

"True Christianity," said Edward Caird, "is not something that was once published in Palestine and which has been handed down by a dead tradition ever since; it is a living and growing spirit that learns the lessons of history and is ever manifesting new powers and leading us to new truths."

In other words, Christianity was at the beginning a principle of life. The Kingdom of God was like unto a seed sown and destined to grow into something other than the seed, though organically connected with it. It was like the leaven which was meant not to remain as leaven but to influence the lump of the world's life and thought, bringing about change and losing its own separateness. Christianity has indeed shown a remarkable genius for assimilation.

"It is an argument," said Dr. Hatch, "for the divine life

of Christianity that it has been able to assimilate so much that was at first alien to it. It is an argument for the truth of much of that which has been assimilated that it has been strong enough to oust many of the earlier elements. But the question which forces itself upon our attention as the phenomena pass before us in review, *is the question of the relation of these Greek elements in Christianity to the nature of Christianity itself.* The question is vital. Its importance can hardly be over-estimated. It claims a foremost place in the consideration of earnest men."

In other words, the distinction between traditional Christianity and essential Christianity is a valid one and must be made. Development and assimilation are essential features of the Christian Faith, but there is still one fixed criterion for determining the rightness and the wrongness of any specific development or change—is it in accordance with the spirit of Christ? Is it for example in accordance with the spirit of Christ that a rigid orthodoxy should shut out from the fellowship of Christ's Church all who cannot assent to certain definitions of the nature of Christ's Person?

Is it in accordance with the spirit of Christ to deny fellowship to those who have the "*anima naturaliter Christiana*," but cannot express their faith in terms of the ancient creeds? Was not Christ's emphasis upon spirit and faith a far more vital, penetrating religious message than any theological doctrine could ever be?

This does not mean, of course, that theology is unimportant. The mind must needs try to understand the experience of the heart. Theologies which are reflective interpretations of religious experience come and go, but theology abides. The efforts of life to understand itself are but "sky tents in which the soul of man rests for a day or an age in its journey from faith to faith." In days of great intellectual interest there is the greatest need for honest theological thinking. Multitudes of people have outgrown

their childhood faith and long to make sense of this world if they can. They are at sea, driven by the wind and tossed. Their religious emotions are associated with a world-view no longer tenable by educated men. The trellis is fallen on the ground and the vine is bruised. To disentangle the tendrils and give them new support requires intelligence, thought, delicacy, and is not unattended with danger. We *must* have theologians and honest theological thinking. We must have men who can show these bewildered ones in our midst how to keep the essentials of faith in an age of science, how to unify the inner life and do away with the discords which destroy our peace.

Helpers of thought are always needed, and theology is the natural complement of faith. No man who is wise will ever discredit the function of thought in religion or underrate the importance of the intellectual issues which religion has had to face from time to time. No man who is wise can have the least sympathy with the foolish and fatuous attacks upon reason which are sometimes wrongly supposed to be a sign of returning faith. Every man should be able to give a reason for the faith that is in him. That is to say, he ought to be able to claim its intellectual truth. In the matter of what he believes every man should aim to be a rationalist. You can give no higher justification for a belief than that it is reasonable: indeed you can give no other justification in the long run for anything.

To be a rationalist and nothing more than a rationalist is to be in a bad way. But not to be a rationalist at all is to be in a worse way. If we believe that the world was made by the Word or Reason of God and that in Him it subsists, we shall also believe that when men think, as well as when they love, they are partakers of the divine nature. Christian disciples must not fall behind the rest of the world in the measure of their conviction that truth is strong and will prevail.

But let us also remember that while theology may explain,

it is the gospel alone which kindles and inspires, and theology without the gospel is dead.

Among all the branches of human knowledge, theology may still be queen, but men will only acknowledge her sovereignty when she confesses that the works of God in nature and in grace are greater than she; that a vast amount of religious impulse and spiritual consciousness exists which never can be brought within the range of what the human mind can find out to perfection; that there are times when thought grows weary and her sturdy pinions beat in vain the rare ether of the Spirit.

All our intellectual concepts must be in touch with a fund of religious experience deep and rich and kindling beyond all our powers of understanding. *What* we believe is no doubt a very important question. But *how* we believe it is not less important. It is indeed far better to have a few, perhaps a very few beliefs, into which we put all the passion of love, all the intensity of prayer and all the heroism of action, than to have a host of religious opinions which hang aloof and apart from life. To have a few passionate beliefs which are principles and convictions makes a man strong. To have a score of beliefs which are not principles and convictions makes a man weak. Few things do more harm in this life than a little belief in a great many things. What the world wants is a passionate belief in something. Moreover, too often is a firm conviction associated with a narrow heart. Too often is a broad mind associated with a loose way of holding conviction. But when a man's belief is in touch with a fund of religious experience deep and rich and kindling beyond all imagining, his spirit is borne beyond all the dangers and temptations of bigotry. And though it is necessary to remove logical hindrances to belief if we would help men in their struggle after a closer walk with God, yet the chief work must always be that of initiation into the life and worship of the Christian soul.

This problem of the soul's life is the one thing that matters. The Christian Church arose as a body of people who were conscious of a common soul-experience. They speculated little about the nature of religion because it was a present fact, redemption and joy and peace. They were not baffled by the perplexities of the mind or lost in the mazes of the heart. They had made the great surrender of discipleship and they walked together in the way of Christ.

That fellowship was the Church. That fellowship is still the Church. In the history of our human institutions there is nothing to match the long, deep hopefulness and endurance of that Christian fellowship. Throughout its history it has revealed a force and a fire intenser than any other institution has ever shown. It has again and again suffered all things, even the treachery of its own friends, and has gone on.

Time was when men fought in defence of the Faith with the weapons of anathema and excommunication. But these are weapons which the world can no longer use. No man can be excommunicated from the Fellowship of Christ except by the death of goodness in his own breast.

"There *is* one grand, all-comprehending Church," said Dr. Channing, "and if I am a Christian I belong to it and no man can shut me out of it. You may exclude me from your Roman Church, your Episcopal Church, and your Calvinistic Church, on account of supposed defects in my creed or my sect, and I am content to be excluded. But I will not be severed from the great body of Christ. Who shall sunder me from such men as Fénelon and Pascal and Borromeo, from Archbishop Leighton, Jeremy Taylor and John Howard? Who can rupture the spiritual bond between these men and myself? Do I not hold them dear? Does not their spirit, flowing out through their writings and lives, penetrate my soul? Am I not a different man from what I should have been, had not these and other like spirits acted on mine? And is it in the power of synod or conclave, or

of all the ecclesiastical combinations on earth, to part me from them? I am bound to them by thought and affection; and can these be suppressed by the bull of a pope or the excommunication of a council? The soul breaks scornfully these barriers, these webs of spiders, and joins itself to the great and the good; and if it possess their spirit, will the great and the good, living or dead, cast it off because it has not enrolled itself in this or another sect?"

That is the true vision of the Holy Catholic Church.

China, in Japan, the child was subjected to cruelties and unspeakable shame, and childhood was a period without rights, without defence, without value.

And it was to that world, which had discovered no inherent value in children, that Christ said, "Except ye become as little children, ye shall in no wise enter the kingdom of God." The despised child was lifted to an attitude of blessedness, and man, the Lord of Creation, must learn the lesson of life from the creature he had ignored and despised.

But in nothing perhaps is this reversal of values seen more vividly, or with such glaring contrast, as in Christ's attitude towards physical suffering.

When a certain leper came to him and said, "Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean"—the tragedy of the situation is revealed in that little conditional clause, "if thou wilt."

It betrays a sad experience with society. In his search for human aid, the leper had found that the real problem was not people's ability to help him, but people's willingness to help him. He belonged to an Oriental society. It was very old and very sophisticated, and had a long and tragic acquaintance with poverty, misery and suffering. And as every observant social worker knows, the effect of that long familiarity with suffering was a brutalising effect. The society to which the leper belonged was tragically indifferent to his misery.

And over against this dark background of callous unconcern stood the bright figure of Christ. He had experienced God's Presence and God's loving Fatherhood—God's anguish for the sins and sorrows of mankind and God's pride in the promise of human living. He had come that men might have life and have it more abundantly, and he went forth amongst them with a gospel of freedom and joy and a consuming desire to help men to realise that gospel in their own lives.

CHAPTER VI

APPLIED CHRISTIANITY

WE have pointed out in a previous chapter that in the life-story of Jesus Christ there was at all points an impressive balance between theory and practice, between the spoken word and the silent work, between the things which were boldly and resolutely taught and the things which were quietly and beautifully done. Not only did he utter new and daring convictions, but he gave them marvellous embodiment in life and glorified the precept by the performance.

There is nothing so startling or revolutionary in the history of mankind as Christ's simple reversal of the ordinary values of life. Let us take two striking examples. Take, for instance, the saying, "Suffer little children to come unto me and forbid them not, for of such is the Kingdom of God." Those words must have fallen like a knife on that audience to whom they were spoken, for nowhere before had the child been held up as a pattern to be imitated. In every country children were the disposable property of their parents, and their comfort, their pleasure, their very life depended on the father's whim or on his enslavement to harsh custom and tradition.

It was not only among primitive tribes that the child was regarded as of no account. There is nothing in Greek life more strange to our modern notions than their attitude towards the child. He was an insignificant being who, if his life were spared, must be moulded and shaped into the proper pattern before anything of value was found in him.

Other countries illustrate the same story. In India, in

God was a loving Father and wanted His children to be well and prosperous and happy, and had endowed them with the capacity for living the joyous and abundant life. Jesus himself had tasted of that joyous and abundant life and knew that it was real.

So he went out among his fellow-men and applied that gospel to every experience of sorrow or of suffering that confronted him. No wonder the people who sat in darkness saw a great light. No wonder the common people heard him gladly. No wonder that men have called him the Saviour of the world; for by teaching the world the refinements of Christian sympathy and the high responsibilities of Christian brotherhood he literally saved the world from the ruin and degradation into which its own callous indifference to misery and suffering were hurling it.

This redemptive activity was the application of his Gospel of God's Fatherhood and Man's Brotherhood to the concrete problems of human life. It was the gospel woven into and made a part of daily life. It was religion put to work, transferred from the laboratory of simple feeling, impulse or emotion and harnessed to the needs and wants, the cares and trials, the duties and opportunities of every-day existence.

Now in our Christian discipleship this application of Christian truth to the affairs of daily life is a fundamental thing. It is, of course, a supremely difficult thing, but without it no discipleship is worthy of the name of Christian. It is by doing the will of God that we realise our sonship to Him. It may well be that in the scale of being a thought is as great as a deed. But for the life that now is, doing is the proof and the evidence of knowing. We may well doubt the reality of our supposed inward and invisible grace if we never find it issuing in any outward and visible sign. The question "What think ye of Christ?" is little against the other question, "Have ye done the works of Christ?" Religion as a knowledge must needs be the specialism of a

trained intelligence. But religion as a daily effort of repeated deeds, as a practical art of training the will and controlling the feelings, as an acting upon plain and positive commandments of righteousness—this is an absorbing life-task of which age cannot wither nor custom stale the infinite variety.

In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the priest and the Levite are condemned not for any evil they have done, but for the good they have left undone. In the Parable of the Final Judgment, those on the left hand are condemned not for any evil they have done, but for the good they have left undone. Those on the right hand are commended not for the evil they have avoided, but for the good they have done.

In the Parable of Dives and Lazarus, Dives is not condemned because he had increased the misery of Lazarus. He had done nothing to lessen his misery—that was all. "Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me."

So, in parable and incident and teaching, the truth is driven home to the heart of man. It is by doing the will that we realise our sonship with God, and the precept of righteousness must confirm itself in the practice of righteousness.

And this aspect of discipleship is of tremendous significance when, in changing times like these, we stand face to face with great moral issues that are raised in our social, national and international relations. As a people we are to-day faced with conditions which affect us all in subtle ways and tend to obscure our obligations as Christians. And amid the darkness and confusion of the times we seem to hear again the exhortation of Christ, "Ye are the light of the world."

Then come the insistent questions—But what is the proper sphere of religion? What is its function and limitation? Where should it begin and end? On the one hand, there are those who define it in terms of purely spiritual life. It

is the intercourse of the soul with its God, a beautiful, tender, loving emotion, the sense of a sacred place and a sacred time. It is something which in its freedom, its beauty and its love ought to be kept apart from the possibilities of profane touch—a place amid the great warfare of men where there is peace.

On the other hand, there are those who say that religion is something more than that. It is a world power, something that aims at revolution not merely in men's thinking and feeling, but in their modes of action. It is a militant thing with a plan and programme for the world.

But can the Church through its regular organisation, through those whom it chooses for its leaders, be trusted to be on the right side of all the complicated questions of the world? Here is a dilemma, and how shall we find the way out?

We shall find it in the way of Christ, a way which Christ himself suggested—religion conceived in terms of power, the power of light. "Ye are the light of the world," and the light is for all that are in the house. It is the nature of light to diffuse itself. There is only one law that the religious man recognises, and that is that his light shall shine and shine just as far as it can.

If the complaint be made that religion sometimes interferes ignorantly with the affairs of the world, the fault is not with the interference but with the ignorance. Ignorance is not light but darkness.

To every righteous-minded man there comes this challenging question which makes him very humble sometimes and very careful—"Are you sure that you have light? For if the light that is in you be darkness, how great is that darkness! Just because you aspire to large human service, in proportion as there comes to you the holy ambition to be in your place a 'light of the world,' 'a city set on a hill that cannot be hid,' just so deeply will you have this sense of

responsibility as a light-keeper and a light-bearer." And in every situation you will ask yourself whether *this* thought of yours or *that* thought of yours is really a light to men. Does it bring gladness and guidance and help in a time of confusion and bewilderment? Or does it bring to the complicated and difficult affairs of practical life a new darkness and a new perplexity?

It is not so much a question of how far you may carry your religion or where you have a right to interfere. *It is a question of the generation of the right kind of power.* Jesus described it as the power of light. "Ye are the light of the world," the light which in the world of thought is *Truth*, the light which in the world of feeling is *Love*, the light which in the world of action is *Courage*.

It would seem sometimes as if Christian thinking, Christian philanthropy and Christian heroism had proved so far inadequate to resist the forces of destruction and degradation, and to prevent the highways of the world from becoming thronged with cruel and conscienceless forces. There has been an incalculable amount of Christian faithfulness in the by-ways of the world, but the highways have not yet been occupied. And it is along the highways that the great evils run which are called the "corporate immoralities" for which we all share the responsibility. In the great church-going age of last century there were eloquent exponents of the Gospel and thousands of eager listeners. And yet in the midst of it all, deep and almost unresisted movements were gradually taking shape in the social and international sphere, whereby the control of the individual over his own life was being taken from him. Giant, inhuman, unchristian forces were at work, gradually gaining ground, until in the fullness of time they turned the fair fields of France and Flanders into ugliness and desolation and death. Religion was as beautiful as ever in the by-ways. But on the highways of the world, great and momentous affairs fell into the hands of unmoralised

and unchristian forces, and there was an outburst so terrible that the whole world became a vale of tears. And yet we knew that every mother's son who went forth to slay or be slain was better than the dreadful things which he in duty had to do.

It is inconceivable that the Christian Churches should be content to wage a wordy war about creeds and confessions of faith or even about the way in which we were created, whether from angels or from apes, and should have no concern with the thought and opinion which will decide whether, in our corporate life as nations, we shall behave like men or like apes who tear to pieces the sacred image of God. We are horrified and scandalised sometimes by the conduct and behaviour of men in the by-ways of life. But when men in high places deliberately advocate and pursue policies which embitter the nations and foster hatred and mistrust—why should the Christian mind wait till the sin has conceived and brought forth death before it can pronounce it wrong?

So the Christian crusader is called to the highways of life. But he will remember that in making religion practical he must first of all make it personal. In applying its principles to social needs, he can ill afford to neglect its application to the individual needs of heart and soul and mind. If in the fullest sense he is to give, he must first of all have gained. It is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaketh and the hand is outstretched in service. No social idealism has any chance of success unless a man remains true to it in his private affairs. No interest in social reform can compensate for carelessness about the quality of individual doings. No brave endeavours towards a new society can make up for meanness in individual transactions. No passion for social regeneration can cover a multitude of sins of private temper and conduct. No man can invest his individual conscience in a general conscience and draw an

agreeable dividend. If he could, then all schemes for a new society would be shattered on the infidelities of the individual character.

There is a vital relationship between personal religion and all social idealism. There is something eating at the heart of our social loyalty if it is not capable of as free and fearless a challenge to our personal spirit and behaviour as ever came from the preaching of a personal salvation. There must be a brave facing of the light in the secret places of the soul and a faithful dealing with oneself at any price of pain. The inner life must still be fed on the mighty and eternal truths of old. Within the inner sanctuary there is the throned Being and the ceaseless crying of "Holy! Holy! Holy!" And we bow with our faces to the ground and say with the prophet, "Woe is me! For I am undone, because I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell among a people of unclean lips."

Then comes the flying relentless Truth to touch the lips with the burning coal. The pain seems impossible to bear, but it melts at last to a strange exultant peace. We hear the challenging call of the social ideal, the voice of the Eternal God saying, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?"

Then the clear answer, "Here am I: send me."

CHAPTER VII

FREE CHRISTIANITY AND A DREAM

IN *Heroes and Hero Worship* Thomas Carlyle refers to the war of the Puritans under Cromwell as "a section of that great universal war which alone makes up the history of the world—the war of Belief against Unbelief—the struggle of men intent on the real essence of things against men intent on the semblances and forms of things." That quotation expresses in a few words the great ideal and purpose of the Free Christian Church. It stands for the great quest for reality in religion, it is animated by a passion for veracity and it cherishes in the heart the overmastering conviction that the primary condition for the discovery of truth is intellectual freedom.

In our own day, the age-long division between the adherents of a dogmatic Church and those who follow the open way has become more and more apparent. We are beginning to realise ever more clearly that there are people in the world—more people perhaps than we know and more widely distributed among all classes of men—to whom sectarian conflicts are not welcome, who will themselves bear little part in them, but will cherish a spirit of unflinching friendliness towards sincere and honest people wherever they may be. That company any of us can join if we will. We can be passionately loyal to our own without feeling the least unfriendliness towards another household of faith. Perhaps there is no surer indication of the growth of spiritual life than the increase of this breadth of sympathy.

The Free Christian Church has never existed for the pur-

pose of making war upon other people's beliefs. It was in its origin an attempt to take broader and higher ground where different schools of Christian thought might come together and sink their antagonisms in the common perception of a larger truth. It has maintained that always under the theological diversities and ecclesiastical systems of the world have flowed the currents of a vital spiritual religion, dependent not on books or ecclesiastical councils or creeds, but on the direct and intimate consciousness of a Divine Presence and Guidance—a first-hand experience of eternal realities. In this faith it has founded Churches and Associations of the open way, combining the impulses of the moralist and the mystic and maintaining religious fellowship in the spirit of Christ without dogmatic restraint or authoritative creed.

It is a tragic irony of history that this inclusive spirit should have excluded a Church so founded and so conceived from participation in many of the acts and offices of Christian Fellowship in the older Churches. But such has been the case. And it has been our task—sometimes a painful task—to stand steadfastly before the doors of the older Churches not as humble suppliants knocking to be admitted on certain terms, but as challenging the Christian consciousness to declare openly and without equivocation what in its view constitutes membership of the Christian Church. That in itself is a mission of no small consequence because of the tendency throughout Christian history to elevate creed above life. We refuse to believe that an era of religious tolerance is fully established or is bearing its finest fruits until, whatever their doctrinal opinions, men can be respected and welcomed for what they essentially are.

When a position is taken by the dogmatic Churches which virtually says that, no matter how Christ-like a man may be in life and character, he cannot be admitted as a member of Christ's Church unless he professes certain opinions far out-

side the realm of human proof, can it be seriously maintained that this is a position of which the Master himself would approve?

“Then shall the King say to those on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” And who were these righteous souls who were to enter into the Kingdom? Not the orthodox in belief, but those who had been merciful and kind and forgiving in their ministrations to their fellow-men.

Is it possible to adopt a totally different standard of admission to the Church of Christ on earth without seeming to say that there is something of greater consequence than saintly and heroic living in the spirit of Jesus Christ?

No one questions the right of any company of people to believe what seems to them to be true and to insist upon that belief as an absolute necessity for all who would join their company. But when it is a question of who is to be reckoned a part of the great Christian host, no one has any right to impose standards and tests which find no warrant in Christ's words.

So the Free Christian Church will go on asking the challenging question—what is essential Christianity and what constitutes discipleship to Jesus Christ? And we believe that the whole interpretation of the spiritual life is at stake upon the determination of the orthodox Churches to give or to withhold the hand of fellowship not on grounds of belief, but on the determination to walk in the footsteps of Christ.

Times are changing. Half a century ago the feeling of those in full agreement with established creeds was practically unanimous. Such as did not choose to subscribe to them must stand aside. Still the majority of Christians stand by that decision. But there is a large and ever-growing minority which sees clearly that such an attitude is a tragic mistake. More and more do the men and women who accept the

guidance of a living God realise that the things that divide them are transient and insignificant compared with the deep faiths of the heart that unite them. More and more we come to see that our theological systems are but broken lights of the eternal, and that the universal elements in religion are the only permanent elements. When the common experiences of joy and sorrow and the common admiration of things true and lovely and of good report bring men together, they cannot easily be separated by the boundaries of sect and creed. One may be of Paul, another of Apollos and another of Cephas—and yet all be of Christ.

The various divisions of Protestant Christianity have had their origin in very real differences of temperament, opinion and method which were of great moment when they actually separated men into distinct groups. But many of these differences have been reduced with the passing of time, and there has shone before the eyes of men the vision of a great Free Church which transcends all sects and includes all names. It is as yet visible to a few only—to those who discern and welcome the common purposes which unite men, though they may still differ in their intellectual expression and in the practical application of their common faith. It is not local or provincial. It does not turn its back upon the past. It realises that hope is empty without memory. For the devotees of old tradition it rekindles the lamp of hope, and for the rebellious children of the dawn it makes fragrant the paths of ancient times. It holds up Christianity as a way of life and exalts fellowship and service above doctrinal uniformity.

Members of this Free Church belong to different denominational groups, but they are often nearer to each other than they are to many Churches which bear the same denominational name. They continue, it may be, to serve faithfully their own denomination, not for any blind sectarian loyalty, but for the advancement of Christ's Kingdom.

“There is a grander Church,” said Channing, “than all particular ones, however extensive—the Church Catholic or Universal, spread over all lands and one with the Church in heaven. . . . Into this Church all who partake of the Spirit of Christ are admitted and no one can be excluded from it but by himself!”

This then is the primary issue confronting the Orthodox Churches in our day, and in one way or another it is bound to come forward for further hearing until, at last, all who profess and call themselves disciples of Christ and can show the fruits of discipleship will be welcomed as true members of the Christian Church. And in that great day there will come the common recognition of something in the Christian life higher than theology and nobler than creed, something which strengthens the bonds of unity and fellowship and makes men of many names comrades and fellow-workers.

Meanwhile, all who are proud to be associated with this liberal movement in Christianity can render their best service to the cause by demonstrating in their own life and conduct what it means to be truly liberal in faith. They can reveal to men that they know how to strip away the accretions of error, and yet hold fast all that is true and beautiful and good in the gospel of Jesus Christ: that they know how to worship, how to pray, how to care for their Churches, how to love and trust and help and heal. In this, as in everything else, actions speak louder than words. Their manner of life, their character, the prevailing spirit in their Churches will be the most convincing demonstration of the worth and preciousness of the gospel they proclaim. Above all, in days of controversy, they will take their part in a high, dignified and kindly temper without guile or complacency and yet in all boldness and clearness and utmost sincerity.

There is a wonderful passage in Spenser's *Faerie Queen* where the poet describes in rich allegorical language the tragic separation of Truth and Holiness, the supreme tragedy

of ecclesiastical history. He pictures Holiness as a man clad in mighty armour going out upon a quest, and by his side there rides a gentle lady, fair beyond all imagining. She is Una or the Lady Truth.

Together they ride into the depths of the forest until they come to a holy chapel where an old priest says incantations over them. Then Holiness looks upon Truth for the first time imagining that Truth is unfaithful to him. He cannot go on with her believing her to be faithless, so in the night Holiness rides away, forsaking Truth in the Chapel of Religion.

That was the beginning of the Tragedy—Holiness, Spirituality separated from simple Truth. Hence all the superstition, the insincerity, the double-mindedness, the barren ecclesiasticism of established orthodoxy which has mistrusted Truth and erected barriers to protect itself against the inroads of Truth.

The Lady Truth is then seen riding out unprotected, and forsaken of men, and is taken up by a savage beast and rides into the forest upon a lion's back. Then men flee from her still more, imagining that she is cruel, harsh, irreligious, to be dreaded. They do not see her beauty, they only see the devouring destructive cruelty of the lion.

Meanwhile, Holiness hides away in the cave of superstition, from which he climbs into the House of Spiritual Pride, the light from which he mistakes for the inner light.

Then there comes to Holiness another beautiful woman who calls herself Fidessa, the faithful one, but whose real name is Duessa, the false one. Holiness falls in love with Falsehood not for Falsehood's sake, but because she seems to satisfy the spiritual impulse.

And so they go on and on—Truth seeking Holiness but somehow missing him; Holiness unconsciously seeking Truth, through superstition, through all the priestcrafts of Duessa, mistaking false for true, professing to seek Truth but all the time living with Falsehood.

In that section of the *Faerie Queen* Spenser has given an amazingly accurate summing-up, in the language of allegory, of the great tragedy of ecclesiastical history—the divorce between Holiness and Truth.

And it has been the central aim and purpose of the Free Christian Church, through all the years, to bring about the true betrothal of Truth and Holiness; to establish spiritual homes where Truth and Holiness are wedded together, where the light of latest knowledge is linked up with the ancient ardours. It has been its central aim and purpose to show that falsehood can have no place in the religious life, and that truth is not a fierce beast seeking whom she may devour, but the friend and comforter of man; that the Church is a great community of the ideal, born in the supreme human passion for perfection and carried out by a tide of high endeavour and sacrificial activity that reached its highest flood in Christ and swept along through all who were really possessed of his spirit.

It is along these lines we believe that the new religious revival for which the world waits must proceed and develop.

The Free Christian movement in religion has not yet recovered from its reaction from the extravagances of the evangelical revival. The people of that time, for the most part, were people of a deep, intense, restless earnestness. They had no need to be urged and goaded on. They had difficulty in being restrained. They worshipped in churches that were draughty, ill-ventilated and savage-looking in their grim, unfurnished severity. They rose to early morning prayer-meeting. They were passionate, punctual and persistent. They listened with stolid earnestness to the driest of sermons. They had enthusiasm, grit, staying power. They were forces to be reckoned with. They said that men were destined to be saved or lost, and they lagged not behind in telling them about it. They had an old creed but a new heart, and a soul that was aflame with a quenchless ardour

for humanity. Our position is the reverse. We have reshaped and remoulded our religious ideals in the light of truth, but we seem to have lost something in the process that we need to regain. And it is a significant fact that no sooner do men and women break away from the old moorings than they seem to lose that very thing—something of the old evangelical fervour and fire. And it may well be the most urgent and pressing task of the Free Christian Church to address itself to this problem, to seek to conserve that fervour and fire, and to save it for the whole Christian Church during the next twenty-five years of theological upheaval.

There is no reason under the sun why a reasonable theology should be incompatible with an ardent spirit of revivalism. John Wesley, who made the desert of England's spiritual life blossom as the rose, was an "intellectual" if ever there was one, and would never persevere in any course which he could not justify to his reason. If some of Wesley's closely-reasoned discourses were preached to a modern congregation, the Church would be emptier than it is. And yet when this man uttered his voice, England knew that the hosts were gathering and the day of battle was near.

There were no sensationalism and no rhetorical fireworks, no frantic flying round for a topical subject which would secure the temporary cohesion of the curious, and tickle the fancy of those who love to sip and browse and taste by the waters of truth. That kind of method, so common in this day and generation, never won Wesley's victories, and never will. Rather did he look upon England as the theatre of a grim struggle, a fierce and terrible war with spiritual lethargy and deadness which must be fought out with every perfection of armament, body, mind and spirit, if the day was not to be lost and the soul of the people destroyed for ever.

To-day, a similar situation challenges us with no less urgency, and the example of John Wesley becomes ever

more significant. And as we picture him addressing the multitude in God's Cathedral of the open-air, with the heavens above him for a sounding-board; when we see the light in his eyes, the calm strength of his character and his passion for souls, it would seem as if there were only one thing in this modern world to pray for—that God would raise up in our midst evangelists like this one, who without any tricks or artifice, but with an unbounded faith in the Gospel, would go forth to shake men's souls and thrill their hearts. There is no more urgent call than this.

It is a dream of mine that when the history of this Free Christian movement is read by brighter eyes than ours, and its tale is told to lighter hearts than this age can show, something like this will be recorded:

“These Unitarians and Free Christians with their quaint names were a valiant people. They arose in those dim far-away times to challenge the outworn doctrines of religion. They said, ‘Our minds march abreast of Truth. We believe in a Creative God who reveals Himself anew to each new generation. We see that time makes ancient good uncouth. We stand for a new freedom of the spirit, for the freedom wherewith Christ set us free, for the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man.’

“Then they cried aloud in the public places saying, ‘What now does this Fatherhood of God imply? What is this Brotherhood of Man? If we know God, we must do His will, and it is God's will that all His children should share the divine joy, that there should be no outcast, none driven to the slaughter, that none should live aimlessly or die the death of the disinherited.’

“So they played a worthy part in the World Peace born in that era, and in the industrial and economic reconstruction and the vast fellowship that followed. Valiant in their love of truth, they were none the less valiant to win the highways for Christ.”

That is the dream. But the end is not yet. Meanwhile, there will be much unrest, much tribulation, much suffering in spirit, and sometimes the love of the many will wax cold.

But the great blessing will come to us, when we shall have made ready for it and are worthy of it.

“Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield.”

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