

UNITARIAN
STATEMENTS

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WE BELIEVE IN

JESUS

by

G. E. HALE, B.A.

LINDSEY



PRESS

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THE LINDSEY PRESS
14 GORDON SQUARE, LONDON, W.C.1

WE BELIEVE IN JESUS

We who are generally known as Unitarians or Free Christians agree unanimously in setting this down as a simple statement of fact—We believe in Jesus.

We may, and do, vary in our beliefs ABOUT Jesus, for individual honesty of opinion has great respect among us. But there is nothing unusual in this variety of opinion, for believers from the earliest disciples down to the present time have varied in their individual points of view. Indeed, there have been periods in Christian history in which even minor diversities of belief about Jesus have given rise to most unlovely conflicts. If there is anything unusual about us in our Unitarian diversities of opinion it is that we are quite frank and not embittered about them. But with one voice we emphatically affirm that we do believe in Jesus. In such an affirmation we do not limit ourselves to a respectful acknowledgement that “ he was, of course, a good man and all that ”. We mean much more than this when we say, “ We believe in Jesus.” By implication we are committing ourselves to a way of life which calls for the utmost courage, self-surrender, and



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devotion. None of us claims to have arrived at such a state of devotion, but that is what this belief of ours ultimately demands and we would be quite honest about it.

However, let us begin with some unemotional considerations that give shape to our characteristic belief. Our simplest plan will be to take the words of our affirmation in their reverse order, beginning with the word, Jesus, and ask ourselves a series of questions.

1. *Why Do We Stress the Name, Jesus?*

Our view is that to begin by using any of the other names by which Jesus is often known is not sufficiently thoroughgoing and might quite legitimately lay us open to the charge of begging the question. That his real personal name was Jesus, no one has ever questioned. Even in its original Hebrew spelling (Jehoshua or Joshua), it has no special significance, although attempts have been made to give it such. Scores of boys were so named in those days by devout mothers. As to whether he should be called the Christ or any of the other names which subsequent reflection or adoration have given him is a matter of theological rather than historical concern, and is not immediately relevant to our method of approach.

What we are seeking to make clear is that we believe Jesus was an historical person—that he actually existed. In setting this down as a belief generally held amongst us, we recognise that in itself it is, strictly speaking, an historical judgement, although there are inextricably bound up with it some of the most intimate realities of our Christian experience. We freely grant, and where occasion requires would earnestly contend, that in the New Testament record of Jesus (the only evidence we possess), there is much that we to-day would describe as legend and myth, reverently interwoven with convincing historical fact. But we do not believe that the records of him are the product, even substantially, of what is technically called a “myth”. Still endeavouring to keep strictly within the domain of historical judgement, we reject the “Christ Myth” theory, not simply because the word “myth” as popularly used has the implication of “unreality”, but because of the unsatisfactory and sweeping presuppositions of the advocates of the theory.

Nevertheless, there is much more that we would like to know about this commanding personality, for when the humble historian is compelled to be silent, even the psychologist, the imaginative poet, and the spiritual seer are not able to answer all the questions we would

like to ask. Such an acknowledgement might seem disturbingly unusual to some Christians who are unacquainted with the findings of Biblical research, but actually it is fully endorsed by many of the most outstanding Biblical scholars of our time, though their deductions may be different from our own. No less a writer than Professor H. G. Wood, in Dr. Peake's *Commentary on the Bible*, gives his conclusions as follows: "To-day we realise that the life of Jesus can never be written. The material is wanting. Neither in quality nor extent do the Gospels satisfy the requirements of a modern biographer. At best they offer us certain *memorabilia* of the public ministry of Jesus, hardly adequate to construct the story of the year or years during which He evangelised His people and barely sufficient to mirror the chief features of His message" (page 659). And farther down on the same page he writes, "For the secret of Jesus belongs to Himself and to them that love Him, and even His loved ones are not in complete possession of that holy mind." Ample warrant for such conclusions may be found in a recently published volume, *The Rise of Christianity*, by Ernest William Barnes, Bishop of Birmingham.

All this, however, does not reduce our knowledge of Jesus to a "wild surmise". A reverent

and scholarly presentation of the evidence may be found, for instance, in Dr. Estlin Carpenter's very readable little book, *The First Three Gospels** in which the content of the Gospel is displayed against its historical background. That the conclusions of liberal Christian scholars are not some modernist freak of learning will be seen from the fact that so long ago as 1907, Dr. Paul W. Schmiedel, who was then Professor of Theology in Zürich, published a remarkable article under the English title, *Jesus in Modern Criticism*. In this article he set out his famous "nine pillars of a scientific life of Jesus", a new approach to the study of the gospels. This work, which created a great stir, recorded the author's satisfaction that "the person of Jesus is being explained in a more and more definitely human way by all theological parties, and in a more or less human way even by ultra-conservatives".

Unitarians, generally, prefer to use the name, "Jesus", because it draws attention to his real qualities as a human being. Many portrayals of him seem to suggest that it is an act of irreverence to call him a human being at all. His sublime personality is intriguing enough even when he is reckoned as a man, but the frequently observed endeavours, however well-

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intentioned, to avoid reference to certain aspects of his life are unrealistic and may be definitely unhelpful to those who seek to follow him. Jesus was fully aware, for instance, of the difficulties involved in sexual matters. He was aware that self-interest was a thing to be overcome or "sublimated", and that self-aggrandisement was something to be guarded against. More than once he was perplexed with doubt, and he knew as much about frustration and disillusionment as any other man. We do not wish to stress these things disproportionately. We desire to give a balanced account of him in the interests of biographical faithfulness and because it cheers us not a little to think that he was a man who would really understand us struggling mortals. It is clear from the Gospels that it would not be necessary for us to explain to him what it felt like to be tempted, tried, and bewildered. There is ample evidence that he was intimately acquainted with the social and political complexities of his age and, consequently, with the difficult individual problem of how to live the good life.* It is certain that he understood human nature and that no one could be more sympathetic and patient with men than he. It is no wonder that women

* See Estlin Carpenter's *Life in Palestine when Jesus Lived*, Lindsey Press, price 2s. 6d.

loved him, for his respect for their innate goodness is probably unique in religious history. Yes, he was a real man if ever there was one.

Our unashamed interest in his human endowments turns quickly into affection as we contemplate the nobility of his achievements. We say "achievements" because we think of his struggles, his long nights of prayer, and his brave acceptance of what he believed to be the will of God.

His life was no mere play-acting in which the final triumph was pre-ordained. God-animated? Yes, but only because of his heroically surrendered will. He gave himself to an enterprise far beyond the goal of other men; he struggled against fearful odds, found himself frustrated, forsaken, and disillusioned, but went through to the end with his deeper faith unshaken and with love still warm in his heart. It is because of all this, when the issue could have been terribly otherwise, that our affection goes out to him and we struggle on by the memory of him. Jesus is not only our example; he is our living inspiration.

"When we read the thrilling pages
Of that life so pure and true,
Stars of hope across the ages
Rise in glory on our view."

Such findings are by way of preparation for

saying that the goodness of Jesus was of a particularly healthy minded and robust nature. This quality was manifest in both his words and his deeds. He was always positive, and in comparison with the conventional religious standards of his time, daring and even revolutionary. Caution, except in so far as it was enjoined by the will of his Father, concerned him but little. As Robert Louis Stevenson has put it, "Christ could not away with a negative; thou shalt! was ever his word". Consequently, the old discussions about the "sinlessness" of Jesus, although correct so far as they go, are quite inadequate in appraising his matchless moral worth. We really have no standard by which to measure him except to say that he out-reaches all standards and moves us with amazement and with a desire to follow in his steps.

2. *Why Do We Believe in Jesus?*

We Unitarians are disposed to think a good deal, but not morbidly, about the general structure of our religious faith; why we believe this or that and even why we believe at all. We want to find a reason for the faith that is in us. Then why do we believe in Jesus? The loyal Catholic believes in him because "the Church" enjoins him so to do. The Evangelical Pro-

testant believes in him because the Bible enjoins him so to do. But we, and Liberal Christians generally, stress still another and more intimate factor. Being historically minded we acknowledge, with discrimination, the cumulative and mighty witness of Christian tradition and we acknowledge, again with discrimination, the inspiring evidence of the Bible, but we are not dogmatically concerned with tradition and documents, as such, but rather with the irresistible impact of the unique personality which brought them into being. In a very real sense we feel that God was in him seeking to reconcile the world unto Himself and has been doing so down the ages ever since. The structure of our religious faith is built upon what we read of him. The more we examine ourselves the more we gratefully realise that it is so, and that this has come about not by the subjugation of our reasoning faculties in an act of faith concerning the absolute authority of some church or some book, but after much hard thinking and deep heart-searching. Historically he anticipates what we come to feel must be true. He personifies our aspirations and typifies for us the religious life. In a word, *he is what we feel we ought to be*. Having said so much we do not differ in any essentials from the vast company of his other disciples who love to ponder his words and

try to follow in his way. Although our faith is *Christian in origin and content*, we do not imply that God was not manifesting Himself in human experience prior to the first century of the Christian era. In the Old Testament, for instance, we have the unfolding story not only of man seeking God but also of God seeking man. In a spiritual sense Jesus is the fulfilment of those divine intimations which moved the Hebrew prophets to envisage a Messiah. To sum up, we cannot do better than quote the words of James Martineau: "The Incarnation is true not of Christ exclusively but of man universally and God everlastingly. He bends into the human to dwell there and humanity is the susceptible organ of the divine."

3. *Why do We Maintain Churches in His Name?*

From what we have already said it is only natural that we should want to remember him. Love does not forget. And so we maintain churches dedicated to God in his name. But our places of worship exist for something vastly more than a sacred memory, or an emotional indulgence. The memory of him moves us to turn to life again and to labour for the advancement of that Kingdom of Heaven on earth of which he spoke so earnestly to his immediate

disciples. Contemplating his life and teachings during our acts of worship we feel it easier to trust in a loving God and more imperative that we should love our neighbours as ourselves. With due allowance for the ever-changing circumstances of time and place we often find it helpful to ask ourselves: "What would Jesus do?"

Our belief in Jesus has implications of responsibility and challenge reaching far beyond purely individual and personal considerations. In this atomic age, this era of "One World", our belief has to take on heroic qualities or be found pathetically wanting.

It has sometimes seemed to the writer that, in the mysterious providence of God, it would be of incalculable indirect benefit if some dictator were to arise, and, in diabolical intention, out-Herod Herod by issuing an interdict that even the name of Jesus should never be mentioned. It would, in one terrible moment, compel the churches and the world at large to realise the far-reaching implications of the simple words, "We believe in Jesus". Something of what might happen can be imagined when we remember the disturbance which some years ago followed the publication of Professor Drews' book, *The Christ Myth*. Massed gatherings of alarm were held by people who previously had taken Jesus

for granted. But suppose the more terrible thing happened and it became a crime to mention even the name of Jesus! Well, taking the world by and large, some would go on their way unperturbed. Some might even welcome the supposed emancipation which such a proclamation would give them from moral obligations. But we imagine the vast majority would realise with a shock the far-reaching implications of belief in Jesus.

Leaving such an alarming supposition on one side, here are some of the implications. No one who intensely believes in Jesus can to-day be "at ease in Zion". The world is in a state of ferment, lights have gone out on many altars, statesmen are nonplussed and nations are as sub-Christian as ever in their feverish efforts for self-preservation. This state of affairs exists not because the teachings of Jesus have been tried and found inadequate, but because they have been found too advanced, and have been politely dismissed as "counsels of perfection" or just simply ignored. Yet in a hopeful and reassuring sense, Jesus still stands waiting. In so speaking we are not thinking merely of his general maxims, such as may be found in any religion and which to some extent regulate human behaviour, but rather of his more arresting, challenging teachings in the Sermon

on the Mount, teachings that go beyond sublime self-interest and speak of the welfare of others, that recognise the inadequacy of justice and urge the sheer necessity of mercy, that show the comparative deadness of legal maxims and call for unmeasured love. But, more than all, to believe in Jesus means to come under the spell of his spirit, to give and not to count the cost, to forgive and to keep on forgiving, to go the second mile, the third mile, and, if needs be, right on to a cross. Jesus is least of all a "lawgiver." Step by step we may enact laws that are in accord with his spirit, but that spirit is beyond legal definition. A belief having such implications is not likely to commend itself to people who look for a nice comfortable religion; it is disturbing to the utmost degree. In humility and with no little shame we acknowledge that at our best we are only following him "afar off", but we think it better to confess this than, in self-defence, to limit him and his teachings to the measure of our attainments. We shall keep on seeking his ideal Kingdom although, in our own lifetime, we may not see it. But what of that? For us it is enough to follow the gleam. And with God be the rest.

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