

Recent Changes in the Presentation of Truth.¹

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IN order to deal in any satisfactory way with this subject, it is necessary for us to look for a short time at the causes which have produced the present situation in the world of religious thought, a situation at least as interesting as that absorbing drama of the nations which we have been witnessing, and more important by far for the future history of mankind. The epoch in which the Church finds itself to-day is one of the great epochs of Christian history, in some respects on the same scale of importance, it seems to me, as the epoch which witnessed the consolidation of the Catholic Church, or as that which witnessed its Reformation.

The foundation fact of the present religious situation is the rise of Science, and the new understanding of Nature which that has brought to light. Nature is the first chapter of that great book of God, which contains the story of Nature, Providence, and Grace, and, since the story is one from beginning to end, it cannot but be that a new reading of the first chapter will react powerfully on our understanding of the others. Now the rise of Science has familiarized men with an order of ideas regarding the divine working which at first sight seem to be in hopeless collision with those convictions regarding Freedom and Sin and Miracle and Providence and Prayer, with which evangelical Christianity stands or falls. Hence, coincident with the spread of scientific ideas there has risen a cosmology purely naturalistic in temper, which systematically denies the truth of all these ideas. Over against it has arisen the Transcendentalist philosophy, which, great as are the services which it has rendered by demolishing the speculative basis of Naturalism, cannot at all points be equated with the traditional Christian thought, nor, as I believe, with the elementary principles of Christian faith. Out of this Transcendentalist philosophy, with its bias against miracle, moreover, have sprung the negative schools of both Old and New Testament criticism, which have given a new reading of the Bible, inconsistent with the view of it which has hitherto prevailed in evangelical Christendom.

¹ Prepared for a Ministerial Conference.

It is not surprising that in such a situation evangelical religion should have found itself gravely embarrassed. By the very principles of Protestantism it cannot entrench itself in the principle of authority like the Roman Catholic Church, but must justify its authority to the reason and conscience of men. Assailed thus in front by formidable schools of thought, which attacked its fundamental religious beliefs, and in the rear by a criticism which undermined the authority by which it had sought to enforce these beliefs, it has had to fight for its very existence.

In these circumstances the long battlefront of the scholastic Protestant theology, with its dogma of the literal inspiration of Scripture, and the proof-text system involved in it, was abandoned, and the apologetic writers of the Church, moved by a wise instinct, took up a line of defence more suited to the new conditions. Waiving the question whether the entire system was true or not, it was obviously tactically impossible to defend so long and so exposed a position against so formidable an attack, impossible to prove the verbal inspiration of so vast and, in places, so obscure a religious literature, and to vindicate so elaborate a system of thought as the scholastic theologians had wrought out in opposition to the Creed of Trent; to vindicate it, at any rate, with so much power as to make it the standard of an aggressive and victorious propaganda. Hence a simpler and more vital issue was raised. Christian scholars fell back upon Christ. Who and what was Christ? became the great questions, instead of conflict over consubstantiation or the imputation of Adam's sin.

Here has been the heart of the battle with Rationalism, for both sides have recognized that with the vindication of the uniqueness and authority of Jesus Christ, or their overthrow, the whole controversy would be finally settled. We recognize the Divine Providence in the conflicts of nations and in the great secular movements of history, but surely seldom has that Providence manifested itself more plainly than here. The issue of that great movement which practically began with Strauss and Baur, has been

the steady emergence out of the mists and clouds of the past, and the dust and smoke of the present conflict, of the historic personality of Jesus of Nazareth, and this at one of the most critical moments in the moral and spiritual history of mankind.

I do not, of course, mean that in the bare literal sense this was a new thing, that Jesus Christ has not always been known as a real person by all true Christians ages before believing scholars girt themselves to answer Strauss and the men of Tübingen. But it is certainly true that the full riches of the Gospels, the colour, the definiteness, the specific teaching, the full human personality of the Jesus of history were imperfectly realized; it was a Christ rather than a Jesus, a redemptive Figure rather than a definite character and mind, that lived in the souls of believers. The last sixty years have witnessed a gradual and silent change. The labours of three generations of scholars in the three great Protestant nations have been focussed on the little handbreadth of history that held the human life of the Lord. Hundreds of workers have laboured, happy if their toil should fling the least ray of light upon the problems that fascinated them, and the process is still going on. A long series of lives of Jesus, of contemporary histories, of critical studies of the Gospels, of monographs on the chronology, the geography, the customs, and the dialects of the land and the time, and on special phases of the consciousness of Jesus; and of treatises on His teaching, are still steadily flowing from the great publishing houses of Germany, Britain, and America. Negative attacks have called forth believing replies, and these again have awakened new criticisms, and these again new replies, and steadily through it all, serene, majestic, incomparably grand and beautiful, the personality of Jesus has arisen upon the consciousness of the world. To anyone who can look up from the dust of the moment to the broad results of the conflict, the spectacle is an amazing one. In a sense Paul's splendid anticipation seems already coming true that 'at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow.'

This is true not only of the scholars and theologians, it is true also in a large measure of the great world which lies outside the inner circles. There is no religious subject which so interests the world at present as that of the character,

thoughts, and life of Jesus of Nazareth. A singular illustration of this may here be given. The greatest force in the realm of literature at the present moment is, probably, Count Tolstoi. His works are to be found almost everywhere, translated into the various languages of Europe, and the appearance of a new book by him is chronicled as a matter of European importance. To most of us, I suppose, his religious and moral teachings appear paradoxical, and his version of Christianity, in particular, fragmentary and impracticable. In truth, Tolstoi cannot be understood apart from his national and social environment, against which his teaching is one prolonged protest. None the less, like all teachers of genius, Tolstoi raises the relevant and burning questions, and the widespread response which his teachings have met shows plainly the things in which men of culture are most interested. The sum and substance of Tolstoi's teachings is that the civilization of to-day, with its armaments and legislation and luxurious fashions is on the wrong track, and that the one hope for the world is in a return to the Sermon on the Mount. That is, in so many words, the lesson of his last book, *Resurrection*, in which the central figure, Nekhliudov, after a prolonged struggle with himself and the civilization around him, comes by chance into the possession of a New Testament, and finds there, expressed in divine words, the truth after which he has been groping. Differ from Tolstoi as one may and must, these closing pages of that remarkable book affect one as a great spiritual spectacle, the spectacle of the most powerful imaginative mind in Europe, moving to such conclusions, and in his own way acknowledging that Jesus Christ is Lord.

No sharper contrast can be imagined than that between the Russian noble of ancient and famous name, writing in his country house, surrounded by his peasants, encompassed by the huge half-oriental fabric of Russian civilization, watched by a vigilant and suspicious censorship, 'willing to wound and yet afraid to strike,' and Mr. Sheldon, preaching in Topeka, Kansas, in a new and half-grown democracy, in a social atmosphere of a very different quality, fighting his battle against saloon-keepers and corrupt politicians, and persons who with the usual results are trying to make the best of both worlds. Yet, allowing for minor differences, on the broad issue

they agree in this, that in a return to Jesus, the very Man of Nazareth, lies the one hope of the world. With Mr. Sheldon's works we are all, I suppose, more or less familiar. We make, I imagine, deductions for the personal equation here, just as we do in the other case. No competent critic would for a moment dream of comparing the talent of the two men. But it is not Mr. Sheldon's intellectual power that has given his books their unprecedented circulation, it is the attractive and transparent simplicity with which he has been able to present his message, and the character of that message itself—a return in matters of practice to Jesus of Nazareth. I might give other instances of this widespread interest in the historical Jesus, but these will meantime serve. We find, then, that by the Providence of Him who overrules the currents of thought as well as those of action, scholars and the world alike are, as never before, interested in the personality of Jesus Christ, and that this interest has sprung from causes deep-rooted in the life of the epoch. What conclusions can we draw from this as to the Church's aim in the new century? I shall refer in what follows to only two of these conclusions, the first relating to the result for Theology, and the second to that for the preaching methods of the Church.

I.

Has this great sixty years' movement of thought and scholarship resulted in any fuller understanding of the gospel or the New Testament which contains it? It is, I think, undeniable that it has put us in a far better position for understanding the New Testament as the historical outgrowth of a developing life. It has brought the historical teaching, as well as the personality of Jesus into far greater prominence, and given it a much more definite outline. The idea which some have of the Epistles as teaching the doctrinal side of Christianity, while the Gospels teach, in the main, its ethical aspects, is outworn. We understand the Gospels better than did the Moderates. Cut the ideas of grace and mediation out of them, and they become a hopeless ruin, for in the Messianic and Apocalyptic teaching of our Lord we have already in principle the essence of the whole evangelical system.

Neither time nor power allow me to examine the teaching of Jesus. Much work as yet remains

to be done in this sphere of thought. The idea of the Kingdom of God in particular, seems to me of immense importance at the present crisis. It lies at the root of the final decision as to the true doctrine of the Church, it forms the principle of synthesis between Religion and Morality, and between the Scientific and Religious views of the world, it is the true theological basis of the Foreign Missionary enterprise, and it involves a religious solution of the Social question. In short, its absence from the Christian system has caused some of its gravest difficulties and some of its worst errors.

What is true of the relevance of this particular idea is true of the teaching of our Lord in general, and this, not only in matters of religion but in matters of ethics. Enough is known to show us the riches of this great open field, and its extraordinary timeliness and interest in view of present problems. Just as the Church of Reformation times found in the Pauline gospel the divine means of escape from the intolerable incubus of the past, a religious achievement which, as such achievements always do, worked its way up from the depths of the heart into the economic and political realms and created the modern democratic world, so, I believe, in the personal gospel of Jesus Christ above all shall we find the divine means of transcending the present difficulties which harass not only the intellectual but the social life of our time, and hamper the Church at every turn.

Can we believe that it is by accident that at the very moment when the whole civilized world is heaving with unrest, when, to many sober inquirers, the very structure of society seems going into the crucible, when, by a vast, united, and yet only half-conscious movement, the civilized Western peoples have precipitated themselves upon the tropical and sub-tropical zones, and the whole question of their duty to the inferior races has thereby come up again with an urgency which all far-seeing teachers recognize to be imperative, can we believe, I say, that at such a momentous time it is by pure hazard or adverse destiny that the Church has been called, as it were, into the very presence of Jesus of Nazareth in a way such as no other century has experienced it, but the first? Believe it who can, and lament it who will! To me it seems better to say, 'O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and

knowledge of God! how unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out!

II.

But now, in view of the situation described in the opening words of this paper, can we reach any definite conclusion as to the line which the preaching of the age should follow? The situation is much too complex for any single formula. Every congregation is a microcosm of many centuries. Hebrews, Jews, and Christians sit side by side in all our churches. Gnostics and Chiliasts, the men of logic, the men of fire, and the men of clay, a variety to make the man who realizes it half despair in his darker hours of ever commending the truth to his people. No doubt there are many in all our churches, probably the majority, who think little about the new century, and the new claims it makes upon us. They simply wish the old truth put in the old way. But among them there sit others, alert and critical, not out of shallowness and conceit, but because they hunger for the tone of absolute sincerity in the teacher, that tone which to-day takes sweat of brain and strain of heart to attain, and because they hunger, too, for the truth in forms of thought which they can take home. They do not love the cloud which has fallen between them, and the old people, and the old church, and the old book, but they are children of the new century, born out of due time, 'wandering between two worlds.' They are few, perhaps, as yet in our congregations, but how fast their number is growing; and, if the analysis of the present position with which this paper opens is true, how fast their number will grow! How can it be otherwise when to-day everyone can read, when our daily evening press is, as a rule, hostile to evangelical religion or frankly agnostic, and when the most radical problems of life and belief are openly canvassed in popular fiction.

One instance will show what is going on in the most unexpected quarters. A ministerial friend, whose work lies in a remote fishing village, which a casual observer would consider hermetically sealed to the modern world, told me the other day that while he was visiting, in one house one of the sons, a young tradesman, asked him if it was wrong to read Darwin's *Origin of Species*. He had somehow got hold of the book, and was reading and enjoying it, when his mis-

givings were awakened by reading a sermon which declared that evolutionists were Atheists. Passing from this house to the next, my friend found the daughter of the house, home from work, reading *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

Now how are we to meet these young people, save them, bring them to know the Christ that we know? How are we to keep them from drifting out of religious profession, disillusioned and embittered, some of them, perhaps, to be flippant journalists, litterateurs, and novelists, with a sneer always ready for the Church and ministers and missionaries; or soulless men of the world, or children of the flesh and the devil? Heresy trials will not do it, rebuke and warning will not do it, for they know that in their protest a truth lies that you have not, but sympathy, prayer, imagination, and the conviction that to-day can be born only of downright toil, may carry us far. What shall we say to them? Are we to content ourselves with simply repeating and diffusing the terms of admiration of Jesus, which to-day are commonplaces to nearly everyone of moral refinement and education? That surely would be to come far short of our gospel and of our calling. Have we not the true key to the situation here in our Lord's own *method*, as we have the key to the theological situation in the subject-matter of His teaching. It was through the Messianic hope of His people that He won an entrance into their souls for vaster truths than the prophets at their highest had ever dreamed. He took them where they were, and led them on to deeper and higher things. And the greatest of His apostles catching the Master's spirit and wisdom, said, 'Unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law . . . I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.'

The widespread interest in the historical Jesus is the modern analogue of the Messianic Hope, and it must be the aim of the Church to transmute that interest into living faith. It must be our work to show that the whole character of Jesus Christ lives and moves and has its being in the realm of the religious truths which He believed and taught, truths as to the Fatherhood of God, of Mediation, of His own Personality, and of the Kingdom of God; it must be shown that if He

were in error here, then His character as having no reality for its foundation would cease to be the great and admirable thing which the uncorrupted conscience recognizes it to be; in other words, that the Personality of Jesus proves His teaching.

We can show further that the Rationalistic and Humanitarian account of Jesus not only breaks down in presence of His explicit teaching, but that it fails to account historically for the experience which is expressed with such astonishing wealth of imagery and thought in the apostolic writings. The class of which I have been speaking are probably not prepared to recognize the apostolic writings as authoritative, but they cannot fail to recognize the truth of the statement which, following his master, Harnack has made in his last remarkable book on the *Essence of Christianity*, that a great historical figure must be judged not only by his sayings, but by the broad effect he produces upon his followers. It can, further, be shown them that the broad effect of this apostolic picture of Jesus is wholly inconsistent with any humanitarian theory of His Personality. The matter is not one only of texts. It is one of *accent*, and it can be shown that the accent of the writers of the Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypse, whenever they name the name of Jesus, is wholly inconsistent with any humanitarian theory of His Personality. There is here something far beyond the reverence and affection of a disciple for his Master, far beyond the delight of the soul at the opening of a new realm of truth by a supremely gifted spirit. There is in the apostolic writings the note of amazement. The writers with faltering lips and stammering tongue are trying to tell of something, well-nigh incredible, which has *happened* and which they must proclaim to the world. *God* was in Christ. It is as if in some Arctic region of thick-ribbed ice and ancient snow the sun had suddenly come ten million miles nearer in the heavens, and a new world of verdure and colour and melody were springing up to welcome his coming. It is just this strange thrill of amazement and worship and love that distinguishes the New Testament from every other book, and that gives it its dynamic power in regenerating and sanctifying the soul. This profound and universal sense of redemption could only have come from Jesus Christ, and therefore again reverent admiration for Him must either disappear or go on to something greater.

If we can bring the earnest men and women of whom we have been thinking so far, they have come within reach of that appeal to the conscience which is our aim. If *God* be in Christ in the apostolic sense, it will no longer content them to admire Him half reverently and half patronizingly in the spirit of moral dilettanteism. If there is in them any moral soundness, they will recognize that there is here something not simply wise, beautiful, and holy, but something imperative and Divine, that personal message from God to the soul, the recognition of which is the beginning of the Christian life. Those who have thus entered the realm of Christian experience have now the key of the apostolic literature and the apostolic thought, and it should be the task of the Christian teacher, as their Christian life develops under the pressure of the providential discipline of circumstance, to make them at home in that domain. 'My soul,' said the Camisard martyr, 'is like a garden full of fountains.' It must be our task to show the men of whom we have spoken that the apostolic writings are not the jungle of Jewish overgrowth that they have believed them, but are in truth a garden full of fountains.

They already possess a nascent consciousness of faith in Jesus Christ. It will be our own fault if we cannot from this point lead them along the lines of Paul's teaching regarding sanctification through faith by union with the living Christ, and of John's conception of the Christian life as fellowship with the Father and the Son. We may show them how naturally and inevitably, when men began to reflect on what was involved in their religious experience, the teaching of the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel grew out of the normal Christian experience of the unique value and authority of Christ. We can show them the apostolic thought on the Person of Christ gradually becoming more and more conscious and explicit on this matter as experience grew, and the introduction of heresy called out its latent riches, until the structure was completed in the words, perhaps the last written in the New Testament, (as the Preface is usually the last part of any book), 'The Word was God . . . the Word became Flesh.' We can show them, too, how inevitably a great thinker like Paul was compelled to bring the new religious experience into harmony with the old, to bring his first belief, 'God was in Israel,' into relation with his

new faith, 'God was in Christ,' and how out of this struggle there arose the Theodicy of the Epistle to the Romans, and we can historically explain his view of the place of the Law in the education of the world and of the abolition of its curse by the work of Christ.

We can show them, too, the same struggle of thought in the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews issuing in the solution given in that great apology.

Finally, in the light of the Christian experience, and by the aid of the new historical knowledge, we can, I believe, show them the real meaning of what is in some respects the most difficult part of the New Testament, the apocalyptic element, which begins with the Second Advent sayings and discourses of Jesus, runs through nearly all the Epistles and expands into the 'sea of glass mingled with fire' of the Apocalypse. By the very nature of the case the Early Church was compelled to confine its aims to the conversion of individuals, the organization of these into churches, and the nurture of their individual life. It was compelled, meantime, to leave the great heathen world of civilization, with its government, its armaments, its social institutions, and its laws, intact. It could no more change these than it could change the climate or stay the tides, and so it simply left them over for Christ to set right in the Parousia.

But every reference to that Parousia, the entire apocalyptic element, the Apocalypse itself, that great Divina Commedia of Scripture, is a testimony to the primitive Christian consciousness of the need for a Christian world civilization. In a word, in symbol and in poetry, and in the time-forms of language in which all prophecy is always spoken, the whole apocalyptic element is a testimony to the social and international mission of Christianity, to which now in the fulness of the time God is calling the Church as never before.

I have already presumed too long, and yet

have only touched upon the subject. I have tried to show that the crisis of thought, from which, as I believe, we are now emerging, was inevitable, and that it was divinely ordained in order that the Church should be led to see new aspects of the old truth. That the old truth remains, in principle, unchanged, we are persuaded. Next to the great Christian name for God, 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our God and Father in Him,' there is no name so dear as this, 'the God of our Fathers.' We are not ashamed of our religion. Rather is our concern the other way about. But we should not be faithful to that religion in its boldest and noblest forms, if we clung to the letter and resisted the spirit. That that spirit is leading us out into ampler fields of action is plain to us all to-day. That it is the Spirit of God that summons us to larger ambitions in the world of faith and thought should be equally plain. The missionary aim of the Church knows no barrier of speech or of blood. Rome at her proudest was not so great in her aims as it is the glory of the humblest Christian to be in the cause of the Lord.

Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
Does his successive journeys run,
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.

We must have the same spirit as we turn to the great realms of culture and of thought. We must aim at such a vindication of the Christian faith as shall *command* the thought of our time in so far as that thought is morally in earnest, and shall bring to an end the long period of uncertainty and twilight, whose close will mark, if God will, a new Age of Faith, out of which will spring a new and nobler civilization, a greater literature, and men and women of a nobler mould, a city greater than Dante ever dreamed of, or Virgil ever sang, 'the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down from God, out of Heaven.'