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## 885TH ORDINARY GENERAL MEETING

HELD AT CAXTON HALL, WESTMINSTER, S.W.1, ON MONDAY,  
23RD MAY, 1949.

ERNEST WHITE, ESQ., M.B., B.S., IN THE CHAIR.

The Minutes of the previous Meeting were read, confirmed and signed.

The following election was announced:—Arthur V. K. Gilbey, Esq., Member.

The CHAIRMAN then called upon Sir Frederic G. Kenyon, G.B.E., K.C.B., Litt.D., LL.D., F.B.A., to deliver his Presidential Address on "Jesus Christ or Karl Marx."

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### PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

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#### *JESUS CHRIST OR KARL MARX.*

BY SIR FREDERIC G. KENYON, G.B.E., K.C.B., D.Litt.,  
LL.D., F.B.A.

THE object of the Victoria Institute, as defined at its foundation in 1865, is "to investigate fully and impartially the most important questions of Philosophy and Science . . . with the view of reconciling any apparent discrepancies between Christianity and Science." At that date the challenge of Natural Science was the main danger which Christianity had to face. The vast extensions of scientific knowledge and of scientific investigation seemed to threaten not only the traditional beliefs of Christianity, but the need for religion itself. The claims of Science were both far-reaching and backed by confident self-assurance, while on the other hand, it must be admitted that much of the current defence of Christianity was based upon inadequate knowledge and unsound assumptions. The relations between Science and Religion had to be re-examined, if the old beliefs and the new knowledge were to be reconciled.

That was the task which the Victoria Institute, nearly a century ago, set before itself; and I think we can claim with confidence that the Institute has carried out its mission. Much dead wood in current beliefs has been cut away; great additions, tending to confirm our Christian faith, have been made to knowledge; while on the other hand the claims of Science have been greatly abated by the realisation that Science by no means covers the whole field of existence so fully as its self-confident

advocates of that generation believed, and that the fields of Religion and Natural Science were not mutually hostile but mutually complementary.

But the work of the Victoria Institute is by no means finished by this establishment of healthier relations between Religion and Science. Nor should we reconcile ourselves to the assumption that our main task now is to discuss minor problems of Biblical criticism—to play, so to speak, in our own garden without much thought of what is going on in the world outside. To my mind, it is more in accordance with the principles of the Institute and with the spirit in which it was founded, that we should concern ourselves with the wider problems which threaten the existence of Christianity itself. It is no longer a question of harmonising the apparently divergent views of Science and Religion; it is a question of defeating a vast movement which would abolish religion altogether, and would corrupt Science into a pseudo-science “falsely so called,” a perversion of the true ideals of disinterested and untrammelled research.

I cannot but believe that this is a challenge which it is in accordance with the spirit of our foundation that we should accept. It was not the intention of our founders that we should concern ourselves with the mint, anise, and cummin of Biblical criticism, but that we should vindicate Christianity in the face of the great hostile force which then appeared to threaten it. To-day, Christianity is threatened, even more formidably, by a new hostile force which claims irretrievably to destroy it; and I believe that our Institute will perform its highest duty if it girds itself to take its part in the great struggle with which Christianity, liberty, and civilisation itself are now confronted.

For that is indeed the position to-day; and it is high time to awake out of sleep before it is too late. Half Europe now, if not in its own heart anti-Christian, is under bitterly anti-Christian domination; and its leaders are inspired with a fervent belief in their own cause which makes them truly formidable. And (what seems to me more alarming still) on our own side we see no comparable confidence, no unity of faith, such as to assure us of an equal solidity of resistance upon our side. Our beliefs, no less than our material resources for armed defence, are in disrepair in the face of an insistent enemy. Like the Jews under Nehemiah, we have to rebuild our walls while keeping our material weapons at hand for immediate use in case of attack.

We are indeed paying the penalty for two or three generations of ease and self-satisfaction. The change within the past half-century has been very marked. In my younger days, in the country, church-going was habitual—evening as well as morning in many cases. During my time at Oxford, in the eighties of the last century, attendance at the University sermons was spontaneous and very large. The capacious galleries for undergraduates were full, Sunday after Sunday, and preachers such as Liddon, Farrar, Gore, Scott-Holland, Sanday, Boyd-Carpenter, packed the whole church to capacity. In the nineties, when I was in London, it was difficult, except by favour, to get a seat in the Temple Church, where Vaughan preached in the morning and Ainger in the afternoon; and other preachers drew large congregations elsewhere. Church-going was, in fact popular, among younger people as well as old, and this certainly continued into the twentieth century. The change within the last half-century is very marked. Church-going now is definitely not popular. Congregations, whether in town or country, are normally small—a mere sprinkling, compared with the crowded churches of the previous generation. When I was a sidesman at Harrow in the nineties, it was definitely difficult to find places in the large parish church on Sunday mornings. At Oxford the large undergraduate gallery in the University Church is gone; in our country churches the regular attendants are scattered thinly over the seats. The contrast is obvious and distressing.

And yet this does not imply hostility to the Church, and still less hostility to religion. What it does imply is a growth of indifference, of loss of interest in the definite teaching of Christianity. And though very general, it is not universal. What is serious, is that this loss of interest carries with it a loss of strength, and an absence of common and enthusiastic action against a common foe who, for his part, does not lack enthusiasm. And it must be added that the substratum of Christian belief is far weaker in most European countries than in our own.

Now, this weakening in Christian confidence is, to my mind, largely the result of the liberalistic scholarship of the latter part of the nineteenth century. In spite of the solid scholarship of such writers as Lightfoot, Salmon, Sanday, Gore, and many others who might be mentioned, there was an effervescence of destructive criticism, emanating chiefly from Germany and Holland, which shook the credit of the records on which our knowledge of Christianity stands. The dates of the New

Testament books were questioned, their authorship drawn into doubt, and their authority as a true record of our Lord's life and teaching so shaken as to be reduced almost to the personal preferences of each new critic. If the scholars could so differ among themselves, what was the plain Christian to think? Was it worth while to come to church to listen to teachings of such questionable authority? For this shaking of our foundations we are paying the penalty to-day.

What then is the remedy, and in particular, what is the duty of our Society? To my mind it is not so much the simple advocacy of Christianity as against Communism, as the provision of the sound basis of scholarship on which the fight against Communism can be carried on. We must regard ourselves as the *scholars* of Christian belief, who can give confidence to its more popular advocates who fight the enemy on his own level. If it was the liberalistic teachings of the extreme left-wing that shook the confidence of the ordinary student or reader in the first half of this century, it is the constructive scholarship of our present-day knowledge that must re-assure it; and that is precisely what modern scholarship is able to do. It is also precisely the kind of work that the Victoria Institute is intended by its constitution and initial purpose to undertake.

It is, to my mind, the prime duty of the Institute to make known the historical bases of Christianity; and for this the archaeological and literary developments of the twentieth century provide a strong equipment. Fifty years ago it was claimed that the results of scientific research had invalidated the traditional historical basis of the Gospels: and it is the conclusion of this fifty-years-out-of-date scholarship that is still being thrust upon us as the latest light of Science. The fact is that the trend of modern scholarship has for the past generation or more been quite the other way. This is the trend of scholarship for scholars' sake, not the partisan claim of Christian apologists. It can be asserted with confidence that the tendency of modern scholarship has for the past generation been to establish more firmly than ever the historical basis of traditional Christianity; and Christian advocates are now in a position to take the offensive with confidence on this basis. It is the destructive criticism of fifty years ago that is now out-of-date; and it is the function of the Christian apologist to convey this assurance to the general body of those who concern themselves with the study and practice of the Christian faith.

Here, as I see it, is the special position of the Victoria Institute in the fighting line to-day; and it is because I cannot expect to be associated much longer with the formation or expression of its policy that I am taking the opportunity of our Annual Meeting to lay before you the policy which I believe to be the historical function of our Society, and to ask you to consider its applicability to the circumstances of our own day. It is not our duty to be retrograde or anti-progressive in our attitude to modern developments, but rather to be forward in welcoming them, in sifting them, in assimilating and in interpreting their results. We should, by our constitution, be the vanguard in the study of modern thought, scientific and religious; not the rearguard, unwillingly accepting results as they are forced upon us. That, at any rate, is the policy which I wish, from the position in which you have placed me, to commend earnestly to your attention.

I ought at this stage to apologise to you. Please do not suppose that I think that the members of our Institute need any conversion to the views that I have been advocating. One does not look to find here extravagantly "advanced" opinions which, half a century ago, claimed to represent the results of liberal scholarship. In this sense I am preaching to the converted. My object, however, is to urge on the Institute and its members the urgent need for a forward policy; that it is not now a time for the cultivation of our own plot, but for positive action against scepticism, and for the provision of the armour and ammunition required to secure the Christian faith against the aggressions of anti-Christian secularism.

For this purpose it is necessary that we should realise the great advances which have been made during the past half-century in increasing our knowledge of historical facts, in both the pre-Christian and the Christian periods. For our present purpose it is a matter of great importance that these advances have, for the most part, been in the field of archaeological and historical scholarship, which is not open to the charge of being corrupted to serve controversial ends. We are able to appeal to facts, not to partisan imaginings. We have the scholars on our side now, not against us.

I need hardly remind a society such as ours of the extent to which this is true of the past half-century. It applies to both the Old Testament and the New. In the field of the Old Testament, our knowledge has been revolutionised by the discoveries

of the 19th and 20th centuries. Instead of being an isolated nation between the great but dimly known empires of Egypt and Mesopotamia, the Israelite community has taken its place among a congeries of peoples, large and small, which occupied all the area between the valley of the Nile on the south, the rivers of Mesopotamia on the east, and the Hittite-occupied areas about the Halys on the north-west. We have been learning much of their history, their literatures and their religions, and can see the little nation which so strenuously followed the worship of Yahweh holding its own among them, and gradually, as knowledge grew and revelation came, extended its claims to a universality in which all the nations of the earth should be embraced. We are able to see this as a rational progress from the closely circumscribed limitations of the worship of the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob, up to the astounding claims of universal comprehension formulated by the great prophets. Yahweh is the king of *all the earth*: Sing ye praises *with understanding*—with a realisation, that is, of all that is meant by this amazing claim.

We have learnt, also, to view the development of the Hebrew people, not as an isolated phenomenon, but in relation to the development of the peoples around it. We know now that writing, instead of being a late invention of about the time of Saul or David, had been known and familiarly used among the peoples of Egypt and Mesopotamia from the fourth millennium B.C. We have codes of law from Babylonia and other Mesopotamian peoples which are coeval with, or much earlier than, the age of Moses, and need no longer be afraid of attributing to the Israelites at the time of their entry into Palestine an elaboration of detail which formerly seemed incredible. From the discoveries at Ras Shamra we have learnt much of the Canaanite religion which was the rival of the worship of Jehovah throughout the history of the two kingdoms. I should apologise for dwelling upon these facts which are well known to all of you; but I want to remind you how strongly we are now based in our knowledge of the history and literature of the Israelite kingdoms, and that it is no longer a welter of uncertain and unrelated details which the critic was free to handle to suit his own particular purpose.

And if this is true of the Old Testament, and of our progress in acquiring an ordered and logical view of its development, it is surely still more true in the more important and vital field of

New Testament study. It is difficult to realise—and I am sure many people do not realise, what an epoch-making change has been made by the discoveries of the last twenty years.

At the end of the nineteenth century, when the liberalistic wave in scholarship which still called itself Christian was at its height, our knowledge of the text of the New Testament was based on the two great vellum codices, the Vatican and the Sinaiticus, which criticism assigned to the first half of the fourth century. There was thus a gap of some 250 years between the date claimed for the composition of the Gospels and the earliest witnesses to their text. Compared with the records in the case of the great works of classical literature, this interval was small, and the text of these title-deeds of Christianity stood upon an exceptionally firm basis; but a considerable interval was left in which the imagination had a wide scope in fixing the dates of their origin and in imagining the course of their development. Of this scope, ample advantage was taken, especially in Germany and Holland, but not without adherents in this country. There was room then to imagine a considerable history of development in the production of the books now composing our New Testament, and the chain of evidence between the actual teaching of our Lord and our extant record of it was so attenuated that scholars and commentators had a great liberty to pick and choose as to the amount of teaching which they would allow to proceed from the Master.

It is this freedom of scope to spread the development of Christian teaching over a period of two-and-half-centuries that has been shattered by the discoveries of the last half-century; and I feel bound to repeat this assertion here, not because most (probably all) of you are not aware of the facts themselves, but because their weight is certainly not fully appreciated at large, and you are the means by which it can be impressed on Bible readers in general, and on those who do not read the Bible because they believe its authority to have been shaken by scientific criticism.

The last half-century has been the period in which the evidence of papyri has come in to supplement and to extend further back the evidence of vellum MSS.—on which we previously depended. And the bulk of this papyrus evidence has only come to light within the last fifteen years or less. Early in the century there were a few sporadic discoveries of Biblical texts on papyrus as old as or older than the great vellum codices; but the really

substantial advance was that made by the discovery of the Chester Beatty group of Biblical papyri, first notified at the end of 1931, and fully published, so far as the New Testament is concerned, between 1933 and 1936.

There was a discovery which at once sliced away a century from the gap which intervened between the composition of the Gospels and Epistles, and our earliest evidence of their text; for although the Chester Beatty MS. of the Gospels and Acts contains perhaps not more than a seventh of the complete text, it is yet extensive enough (except in the case of St. Matthew), to give a clear and substantial idea of the text of these essential books. And more than this. The text of the Chester Beatty Gospels and Acts shows so much difference in detail from the texts of the great uncials, whether Alexandrian or Western, as to show that a substantial period must lie behind it during which these books were circulating and passing through the normal stages of manuscript transmission.

The period during which the long and tangled processes of evolution, envisaged by the "advanced" critics, during which the Gospels emerged from a series of writings and re-writings, and the epistles of St. Paul were being put together from scattered fragments among the archives of the churches of Asia, was already becoming inconveniently narrowed, and much of the destructive criticism which had its heyday at the end of the nineteenth century had already been so much shaken that an impartial observer would have ruled it out of court. But more was still to come; and it is this latest evidence of which the full effect does not seem to me to be yet fully appreciated, and which I therefore ask your leave to emphasise once again. This is the fragment of the Fourth Gospel discovered by Mr. C. H. Roberts in the John Rylands Library at Manchester, and published in 1935; supplemented by the remarkable non-canonical fragments in the British Museum, published in the same year by Messrs. H. I. Bell and T. C. Skeat. Both manuscripts are assigned by palaeographers, both in this country and abroad, and on purely palaeographical grounds, to the first half of the second century—say about A.D. 120–140.

Now although the Rylands fragment is so small—only a few square inches—its evidence is decisive. Where there is now this tiny scrap, there was once a complete copy of the Fourth Gospel—the Gospel which by common consent of scholars of all schools is the latest of the books of the New Testament. If that was

circulating in Egypt about A.D. 120-140, it is mere perversity to deny that the origin of the book itself must be pushed back at least to the beginning of the century—to within a negligible distance, that is, of the traditional ending of the life of the apostle whose authorship, in its concluding chapter, it claims. Such a claim, made half a century later, might perhaps have passed muster as a legitimate literary device; but is it conceivable that, if it were not true, it could have been made within a few years of the death of St. John, when many were alive who knew him, and who would have repudiated a false claim by some unknown contemporary? If the dating of this Rylands fragment holds good, surely any rational criticism must admit that the case for the first-century date of the book and the authorship of St. John is so strengthened that it is mere perversity to deny it. To mention it, and then ignore it, as is done by the Bishop of Birmingham, is the abnegation of scholarship.

How much can be added to this by the British Museum fragments of an unknown Gospel, may be a matter of discussion; but it is surely quite impossible to deny some connection between the Fourth Gospel and a narrative containing such definitely Johannine phrases and so clear a Johannine colouring as the following: "Search the Scriptures, in which ye think ye have life; these are they which bear witness of me. Think not that I came to accuse you to my Father; there is one that accuseth you, even Moses, on whom ye have set your hope . . . And the rulers sought to lay their hands on him that they might take him . . . and they could not take him, because the hour of his betrayal was not yet come. But he, going out through the midst of them, departed from them." The exact relation between this narrative and that of the Fourth Gospel may be a matter of dispute; but that there is a connection, and that it confirms the early date of the Gospel, can surely not be denied.

I must apologise to those of you to whom the facts that I have been reciting are familiar, and for repeating what I have said about them elsewhere; but they are of such fundamental importance for the history of the New Testament and of Christianity, that one may surely be pardoned for dwelling upon them, and for urging you to make them as widely known as possible. Otherwise they may fail to make the impression they deserve on popular opinion. One can see what may happen from the example of the Bishop of Birmingham. He mentions the Rylands fragment of St. John, and then proceeds to ignore it.

He does not, or will not, recognise that it blows the whole of his argument to pieces. If the Fourth Gospel was not only in existence but in circulation so far away from its probable place of origin as Egypt in the course of the first half of the second century, nine-tenths of the ingenious theories of the origin and structure of the Gospels falls to the ground, because there simply is not time for the complicated processes of development which they advocate. *The history of the New Testament literature has got to be confined to the first century of our era.* That, as it seems to me, is the inescapable result of the discoveries of the last fifteen years; and it is the duty of the scholars who are acquainted with and appreciate the value of this evidence—of the members of our Society perhaps in particular, to spread the light as widely as they can. This is my apology for going over the ground again to-day.

We have thus to cut away, once and for all, a great mass of literature and learning which has cumbered the ground during the past two or three generations, and to go back to the area so well and honestly cultivated by the great English scholars whom I have already enumerated—Lightfoot, Salmon, Gore, and their colleagues and successors. Within the period indicated there is plenty of work to be done; but within those limits it must be kept; and I trust the Institute, with the zeal and earnestness that characterise it, will play a leading part both in the researches that have to be made, and in disseminating their results to the multitudes of interested listeners.

For that there are multitudes of such listeners I believe, if we can only win back their attention to these matters, and convince them of their vital importance for the contest and materialism and secularism with which we are faced. And one method which I think we should stimulate with all the power at our disposal, is the revival of church-going. How else are we to reach the great mass of our population? "How shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach except they be sent; as it is written: How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things?" That, I believe, is the function of the Victoria Institute in the present time of crisis. It is not enough to lead decent lives and reject the allurements offered by Communistic advocates. What is needed is the

affirmation of a faith, to meet the faith of Communism. The original task of the Institute, to establish better relations between Christianity and science, has, as it seems to me, been largely accomplished. We have now to take on a new task, to resist the inroads of Marxist Communism. In this conflict our task is, I think, to provide the scholarly basis, to assure Christians generally that our foundations stand firm, and to rally the forces that fight for Jesus Christ against Karl Marx. And the special point which I am anxious to urge to-night is that the Victoria Institute should be active in this fight, not passive. We should be in the forefront of scientific, well-informed, criticism, not lagging in the rear.

At the moment, the outlook may not seem too good. The forces of civilization are only now rallying to meet the threat which comes from the east—a threat directed by determined men with enthusiastic followers. The threatened civilisations have been divided, some of them shaken by recent unsuccessful war, and with no common spiritual ground of resistance. It is that which we have to restore. Politically much has been done in the last few months; what we need is that this political unity should be supported by a spiritual unity. And though the task appears difficult, we should not despair. The Church has often been in a minority. It has survived more threatening storms than these.

We have, I think, to realise more clearly both the danger that confronts us, and the forces which we have with which to meet it. On the one hand, anti-Christian Communism is active and is ably organised. But it should be realised that it is largely a façade. The mass of the peoples of the Communistically ruled countries is by no means wholeheartedly Communistic; part is definitely opposed to Communism, but is terrorised by force; much is indifferent. The Communistic challenge must be faced, and it may be found more hollow than it at first appears. On the other hand, there is plenty of evidence, which may be found in the reports of the British and Foreign Bible Society and the S.P.C.K. and S.P.G., of a world-wide demand for Bibles, far greater than the printing trade is at present able to meet. We should therefore, maintain unshaken our confidence that Christianity will come through this crisis as it has come through many crises in the past; only we must realise that it is our duty to put our shoulders to the wheel. We have a right to hope; we are bound as Christians to believe; and in this hope, and this faith, it is our duty to go forward.

## DISCUSSION.

The CHAIRMAN (Dr. Ernest White) said : We are greatly indebted to our President for the important address which he has delivered. Sir Frederic Kenyon is not only a great scholar, foremost in the ranks of New Testament experts, he is also an old and trusted warrior in the battle for truth. We are grateful to him for putting his keen intellect and wide knowledge at the disposal of the Victoria Institute.

The subject which he has chosen is of very great importance for the future of civilisation. The war between communism and Christianity is not merely a clash of theoretical or philosophical ideas, it is a practical, living issue between all that is best in Western civilisation on the one hand, and a Godless system on the other, a system which would destroy human liberty as we know it, and overthrow the Christian faith.

Historic Christian faith has suffered from severe and repeated assaults during the past hundred years.

With the great scientific discoveries of the nineteenth century, theories were put forward which culminated in a mechanistic hypothesis of the Universe. The Universe was represented as a vast machine operated by blind laws, without intelligence or purpose. There was no need for God in all this, or if the conception of God was permitted at all, He was relegated to the position of an original first cause Who set the machine going at the beginning, but had nothing further to do with it. God became superfluous. Things could continue very well without Him.

In another direction, the Christian faith was assaulted by liberal theological theories which undermined belief in the truth of the Bible. Of many ministers of religion it might be said, "How shall they preach if they do not believe what they profess to teach." The man in the street became confused, and it was not altogether the fault of the people that they ceased to go to Church. Faith was undermined. Men and women of our generation are perplexed and confused. Someone has likened their mental attitude to a big question mark.

Hence the great importance of what Sir Frederic Kenyon has stated to-day about the early authorship of the New Testament writings. He has presented us with no mere theory, but with an objective fact, the discovery of the fragment of St. John's Gospel

on a papyrus dating back to the early part of the second century A.D. The date of the fourth Gospel has been a battle ground of opposing theories for many years, and now we have incontrovertible evidence of its early date. This gives the final blow to theories of myth or legend put forward in the past, and proves that the records of the life and sayings of our Lord were written down and circulated within a generation of their occurrence.

Our President's address contains a two-fold challenge.

In the first place, it is a challenge to all Christians. So many Christians appear to be ignorant of the historical evidence upon which rests the authenticity and authority of the New Testament documents. There is no longer any excuse for such ignorance. Recent discoveries have rendered untenable the older critical views which threw doubt on the reliability and early date of the documents. We are able now to give a reason for the hope that is within us, a reason founded on recent discoveries which demolish the edifice of Higher Criticism built up on wrong and imperfect knowledge.

In the second place, Sir Frederic issues a challenge to the Victoria Institute. It is our privilege, and we must make it our business, to give thinking men and women sound reasons for the faith which we hold. A great opportunity lies before us. We have the goods, and it is for us to make them known and to deliver them. We believe that the Institute has a great function to perform in the coming years, and we have been given a challenge which we trust will be meditated upon and accepted by the members.