

THE CHRISTIAN SPIRIT AND THE MODERN WORLD.

It is now generally accepted as a truism that Christianity is not a creed but a life. But the statement, with all its appearance of simplicity, is profoundly misleading. It becomes mischievously false when it is used, as it often is, in order to evaporate the intellectual content of Christianity, and reduce it to a mere sentiment, or at best, to a system of ethics. No presentation of Christian truth can be acceptable that ignores the appeal to the reason, and substitutes for it any lower or easier appeal. But on the other hand, it is equally untrue to the facts to resolve Christianity into a purely intellectual or theological system, and to make subscription to a creed its final test. We are involved at the present moment in a strong reaction from this tendency, and it is compelling a new and healthy interest in the practical and experimental side of the Christian faith. Men are asking what Christianity involves in the way of life and conduct as well as in the way of belief. And it is well that they should do so, so long as they do not make the two things mutually exclusive. Modern intellectual conditions are forcing us to revise our theology. Christian candour demands no less. But the process is resulting in a new sense of proportion. The Christian facts require intellectual interpretation, but they have also certain moral and spiritual implications. It is these that give the proof of the thinking and are the test of the truly Christian creed. The life of Jesus Christ, for example, has its dogmatic presuppositions

and consequences. But it must be studied, in the first instance, apart from these, and the result of this study is to bring into strong relief its bearing upon conduct and character. To be a Christian is to believe in Jesus Christ; but belief in Him means something more than a mental assent to the theories of His work and Person which pass current among those who call themselves by His name. It means also a personal relation to Him which results in a certain likeness of character and a certain identity of aim. It is, therefore, highly pertinent to the modern situation to inquire with some exactness what Christianity means on the side which affects human life and conduct, to ask what are its practical bearings and how far should it affect the complex conditions of life in the present age. We may willingly accept the apostolic test, "If any man have not the spirit of Christ he is none of His," but we have also to inquire what the spirit of Christ is, and how far it is possible to enshrine it in a human life in this twentieth century.

The inquiry raises at the outset a difficult historical problem. Nothing that can be called a biography of Jesus Christ is in existence, and critical research has considerably reduced the materials out of which it may be possible to form a judgment as regards His character, teaching and claims. Nevertheless, the real crux of the situation is not here. Even when the materials for the life of Jesus have been sifted to the utmost, enough remains for all practical purposes. Harnack's judgment respecting the Gospels may be fairly accepted, as when he says,¹ "In the first place they offer us a plain picture of Jesus' teaching, in regard both to its main features and to its individual application: in the second place they tell us how His life issued in the service of His vocation: and in the third place they

¹ *What is Christianity?* p. 31.

describe to us the impression which He made upon His disciples, and which they transmitted." It would be hyper-criticism to require more than this in order to form a general idea as to the type of character for which Jesus stood, and as to the spirit which He inculcated. But the real difficulty meets us when we seek to translate His example into terms of our modern life. He lived under and dealt with conditions which are utterly different from those with which we are familiar at the present day. And men are not slow to express their belief that certain of the principles of conduct which He laid down are quite incompatible with the order of modern society. They do not conceal their opinion that the ethics of Jesus are Utopian, and they are too ready to abandon in despair the attempt to apply them to their own circumstances. This attempt, however, must be made if Christianity is to retain its hold on thinking men, and to fulfil its function of leavening human society with the principles of the Kingdom of Heaven. It can only be successful, however, as we view the teaching of Jesus from the standpoint of the spirit which He inculcated and cease to expect to find in His words definite formulas applicable to modern needs. He spoke in the language of His own day; and the moral and economic conditions pertinent to the time were ever present to His mind. But underlying His practical teaching in respect of these were principles which hold good for all time, and it is with these mainly that we have to do.

Jesus Christ came into the world conscious of a mission, and conscious that His mission was from God. He recognised from the first that He "must be about His Father's business," and His interpretation of this "business" led Him to take the attitude He did towards all human actions and relations. He looked at the life of His day from a standpoint and a vantage ground above it. He saw it all

in the light of the ends which He believed it was destined to serve—ends which He described to Himself and to His contemporaries in terms of the Kingdom of God or of Heaven. His aims and His point of view were thus other-worldly—or, if we prefer to use the term, supernatural. Human life was to Him a far larger thing than could be indicated by the operations and interests of this world. A man's life could not consist in the abundance of a man's possessions. To confine it to these things was to make shipwreck of it. The story of the Temptation in the Wilderness indicates much more than the thought and determination of Jesus regarding His own work and mission. It sets before us, in unmistakable terms, His belief in those higher ends and motives which should regulate all human conduct. That man doth not live by bread alone, but by the word of God, that the kingdoms of this world and all the glory of them are but as the small dust of the balance in comparison with doing God's will, became the commonplaces of His teaching and illustrate the gulf which separates Him from a self-seeking and materialistic age. To believe in Jesus Christ is, so far forth, to accept the spirit of this teaching, and to seek to enshrine it in action and outlook.

To do this, however, is not to lay Christianity open to the reproach of other-worldliness. It does not mean that a Christian must separate himself from the life of his time and take no interest in those mundane activities which are so absorbing to the average man. On the other hand, the Christian of all men may say with the pagan poet that his interests include :—

“*Quidquid agunt homines, votum, timor, ira, voluptas,
Gaudia, discursus.*”

But the difference between him and other men consists in the fact that these things do not fill the whole of his horizon. He uses them not as ends in themselves, but as

means to higher ends. These higher ends he interprets not in terms of material reward and achievement, but in terms of the unseen, of character, of the soul and of the will of God. To use the old distinction, the Christian is in the world but not of it. He will not suffer himself to be caught up in the stream of life and hurried along with it against his will. He keeps his head above it all the time, learns by the aid of his own inner force and determination to breast it at times, and to force it into channels of his own making. There is a necessary element of mysticism in every interpretation of Christianity. It is this which saves it from becoming a mere code of ethics. And the essence of this is the sense of the unseen as a motive for action and as determinative of the ends we have in view. No interpretation of the teaching of Jesus Christ which leaves this out of account can be true to the facts or speak with any effect to the men of to-day.

It must, therefore, be recognised from the outset that any true interpretation of the mind of Jesus Christ begins with His doctrine of God. From this point of view theology has to be reckoned among the practical sciences. It bears on human life and happiness in a fashion as intimate and far more important, than, say, chemistry or electricity. When Jesus spoke of God as Father, and interpreted the term as in the parable of the Prodigal Son, He lifted heavy clouds of doubt and apprehension from men's minds, and made it possible for them to face life with a serenity and a hopefulness to which they had long been strangers. We are not concerned here with the exact terms and definition of His doctrine of the Fatherhood, but rather with those moral results of it through which it can perhaps be best understood and appreciated. For Him the new name of God meant a new relation with God. He exemplified this first in His own person and thereby made it the norm

for Christian thought and conduct for all time. His sonship to God was a relation not merely of natural dependence, but of moral and spiritual affinity. In assuming the reality of it for men He profoundly modified their attitude, not only to God, but to one another and to the world around. His doctrine of God involved a corresponding doctrine of man. He believed in human nature as such, in its infinite possibilities and in its power of adaptation and regeneration. The secret of His attraction for the men and women of His day was the fact that He saw in them the best that was yet to be, and filled their souls with a hope that was in itself a genuinely renewing power. They realised that they were worth something in God's eyes, and the new estimate of themselves which this involved was the beginning of salvation to many of those whom Jesus addressed as lost.

These ideas, when transferred to the followers of Jesus, took new shape and became exceedingly fruitful. They are still active and potent, and it is the chosen task of Christianity to represent and interpret them to the world. The Christian spirit is the incarnation of the mind and spirit of Jesus Christ. It follows as the result of the work of Christ on the individual soul. We have not to do now with the processes by which the result is brought about, so much as with the result itself. But it should be clearly recognised that this result is not an isolated and supernatural phenomenon but a growth which has deep roots.

The Christian spirit means, then, in the first instance a new relation to and apprehension of God. One main effect of the teaching of Jesus was to deliver men from those fears and uncertainties which the name of God had too often suggested. Implicitly in His mind grace took the place of law, and men were led to think of God not as requiring of them but as giving to them. This led to a new spirit of trust and hope, and it is one that becomes fundamental

in the Christian character. To Jesus Himself a quiet trust in God was of the very essence of religion. He spoke so emphatically on the subject that His words have been often misunderstood, and even in these days men can hardly persuade themselves that He was serious. To take no thought for the morrow, to keep oneself free from anxiety and worry, and to be content with the knowledge that God knows our needs, is something very far removed from the busy and careful temper of these days. Yet Jesus spoke in this way advisedly to a people much immersed in trade, and apt to be as anxious about the things of this world as any moderns. He saw the sin and folly of it all, and taught the need of a spirit which would lift men above toil and circumstance, and help them to breathe a higher air. And this spirit of trust, this poise of soul, is a thing characteristically Christian. It leads men not to be careless about the things of this world, but to hold them at their right value and keep them in their proper place. It gives them a perspective of the soul, and shows them life in its true proportions. It helps them to take into account always the things eternal and unseen, and to move through life as masters, who keep a soul above earthly things, who know how to make the best use of them, and are not distracted by their claims. This is the spirit that is needed in order successfully to deal with many of the pressing social problems of to-day. These will never be solved so long as they are regarded from the merely materialistic point of view. While they fill the whole horizon, and life is approached as though it did consist in the abundance of the things a man possesses sane judgments and effective remedies are impossible. That life is more than meat and raiment, that man doth not live by bread alone, are precepts which belong not only to the Church and the pulpit, but to the market-place and the political platform. To neglect them is

to warp one's view and to blind one's eyes. It is only from this Christian, or if the phrase is preferable, from this other-worldly standpoint, that it is possible to obtain a clear understanding of the situation, and to discover remedies which will meet our pressing needs. Belief in the Fatherhood of God is not a mere article of a creed, it is a temper of mind, an attitude of the soul. It becomes a standing rebuke to that fretfulness and anxiety which are so characteristic of the Christian Church in these days. If the Church is successfully to leaven the world, she must believe in her own message, and she must approach her task in a spirit of sane and confident optimism. It is no losing battle that she has to fight. God is not always on the side of the big battalions, and those silent ethical and spiritual forces by which she works are more potent in the long run than men or money or arms. A sound and experiential belief in Providence, with its consequent freedom from worry and nerves, is the best indication of a truly Christian spirit, and is the condition precedent of successful Christian work.

Turning now from God to man, we may accept the general conclusion that the idea of the Fatherhood of God involves the further idea of human brotherhood. But this again, to be effective, must pass from the region of mere creed to that of actual experience and practice. The brotherhood of man may be no more than a meaningless formula, or it may contain within it the inspiration to the highest human life. It is not the accuracy of the idea or the interpretation of it with which we are concerned, so much as with our own attitude towards the obligations it involves. As we have already seen, the teaching of Jesus sets humanity before our eyes in a new and larger light. It breaks down those entrenched barriers of race and colour and creed which have been the most potent sources of human strife. It puts all humanity not on a level, but in a position where equality

becomes at least possible. In showing that God is no respecter of persons, it reminds us that in His sight all persons may be equally entitled to respect. Thus the teaching opens out new and wide avenues of human duty. It calls not merely to a vague philanthropy, but to that active service of mankind in which Jesus Himself was so splendid a pioneer. The spirit required here is again characteristically Christian. It is the spirit of meekness, humility, self-effacement. It is the very opposite of that spirit which was most popular in the pagan world in the days of Jesus, and is strangely popular in "the world" to-day. Self-assertion, self-realisation and the like are necessary duties no doubt; but, as they are popularly carried out they are the very antithesis of the Christian spirit. To Jesus realisation of Himself meant not a pushful self-advertisement, but self-sacrifice, the losing of life in order to save it, and the same remains true for His followers. His attitude to God was one of deep and settled obedience, an obedience which followed naturally from His perfect trust. For Christians faith must have the same issue. Above all things they delight to do His will, and, according to the teaching of Jesus, they find the will of God for them expressed in that extra righteousness which is the sign of the children of the Kingdom. The ethical consequence of their faith is that inner and spiritual righteousness which was in so sharp a contrast to the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. The spirit of faith towards God which works out in love towards men is a better thing than any legal correctness of life, and opens to us the central secret of the Christian character.

On the human side, therefore, the Christian spirit is best described as one of love and service. Something more is required of the Christian than a conventional doing of his duty towards his neighbour. The new relationship to God which Jesus came to make known to men involves

for them a new appreciation of their fellows. Neighbour becomes a word of far deeper and wider significance, and love takes the place of duty. Jesus Himself exemplified in His own Person that spirit of service towards men which is the highest expression of Christian love. He embodied this in a kind of third sacrament which the Christian Church would do well to celebrate with the same scrupulous care bestowed on the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. When Jesus took a towel and girded Himself and washed the disciples feet, He was not only leaving them a formal example, He was enshrining in a beautiful deed the spirit which was to characterise His followers for all time. "The Son of man came not to be ministered unto but to minister," is the charter of Christian service and the watchword of the Christian life. To be among men as one that serves, to live not for self-interest alone but for the interests of others, to subordinate private and personal aims to the collective good of mankind, this is the ideal of Christian conduct, and in this sense every Christian has to become as Christ unto men. The obligation is one that seized on the imagination of the Christian Church from the first. It found vent in that abortive experiment in collectivism of which we read in the Acts of the Apostles, and it has continued to inspire men and women to ministry and self-sacrifice ever since. In the present age it is likely to receive a new impulse from the growing sense of the solidarity of mankind which is characteristic of much modern thinking. Christianity is a natural solvent of human barriers, but in this direction as in many others it works very slowly. Now, however, its operations are being continually furthered by all those forces which tend to draw the distant parts of the earth nearer to the centres of civilisation, and to break down those influences which have served in the past to keep different races apart in ignorance and

suspicion. These modern conditions present the Christian Church with an unexampled opportunity of putting into practice her precepts of human brotherhood and of being among men as the servant of all.

With this wider outlook has come a broader conception of the mission of Christianity to the world. The task of the Church is not now limited to evangelisation alone; or rather, the Church is rising to a new conception of Evangelisation, and one more suited to complex modern needs. The old-fashioned picture of the Christian missionary preaching under a palm tree to half-naked savages, and the old-fashioned idea that missionary work meant grafting on to the heathen a Europeanised evangelicalism, have passed away for ever. Missions, both at home and abroad, include every possible agency for the social, moral and educational uplifting of mankind. With a new understanding of the meaning of ancient and Pagan faiths has come a new appreciation of the peoples who hold them, and a new point of contact with them. The Christian idea of human brotherhood is felt to be something more than merely utopian, and the evident capacity of man for religion gives to the Christian propaganda a new note of hope. So at home the social and institutional work of the Churches makes for the same ends, and springs from the same sources. It involves a wider conception both of the Christian gospel and of the capacity of those to whom it comes. It is a clear and striking application of that spirit of charity and service which is most characteristically Christian. What this may mean for modern life and society it is our task, if possible, to discover.

Christianity admittedly deals in ideals. It bids men aim at the higher life and lays down rules which amount to a counsel of perfection. It is, therefore, often condemned as unpractical if not altogether impracticable. The Church

as a whole has acquiesced in an average and conventional standard of Christian conduct, which is far indeed from giving a fair representation of the reality. On the other hand there are many to whom the Christian ideal seems the highest possible, and in whose eyes it gives the only promise of that new moral and social state which they desire. To these the reproach of Christianity lies in the fact that it is seldom or never exhibited in its fulness to the world. They admit the difficulty of applying it to the complex needs and circumstances of the present day, but they feel that the attempt should be made more seriously and strenuously than has ever yet been the case. It is no doubt true that in His ethical teaching Jesus Christ used the language of His own time and dealt with circumstances as He found them. But at the same time He inculcated certain principles which are eternal and capable of application to an immense variety of conditions. There is some reason to believe that the modern Church has failed to grasp this fact and to rise to the responsibility which it involves. A modern Anglican ¹ teacher has stated the case none too strongly as follows:—"We are told that whole classes of our fellow-countrymen have drifted away from any kind of systematic religion, and that the chief cause of this departure is the impression that outward religious observances and the acceptance of creeds make no difference in action and character; that people who go to Church are no better than those who do not. The workman observes that the Christian employer who in his private life is prominent in religious and even philanthropic activities, is to him just as hard and exacting a taskmaster as the man who professes no belief: and he is being taught also to observe that the Church has for many years opposed

¹ Rev. J. F. Peile, in *The Reproach of the Gospel*, Bampton Lectures, 1907, p. 7.

every reform which has benefited the mass of the population, and looked coldly on efforts outside legislation to improve the condition of the labouring class, such as the Temperance movement; neglecting and thwarting them in their earlier stages, and only patronising and exploiting them when they have established themselves without its aid. We know that this charge against the Church and Churchmen is not wholly true, but it is true enough to be widely accepted and to be very difficult to disprove: and the belief in its truth has incalculable influence in driving men, not only from the Church, but from Christianity."

It is, therefore, above all things necessary to distinguish in this matter between Christianity and that representation of it which we find in the organised Churches. We are not shut up to the belief that all that is possible has been done to apply the teachings of Jesus Christ to the needs of men. The Christian ethical system must lose something in the process of realisation. But the loss should be less and less as time goes on. If the Churches as they are constituted to-day fail fairly to represent the Christian spirit, then they must give way before some other power or organisation that will do their work more satisfactorily. We shall do well here to learn the lesson which is written broad on the face of history. Again and again in the past the Church has become decadent, and has failed to rise to the measure of her opportunity. But as often as this has happened there has come the breath of a new life, and from the ashes of one dead Church there has arisen another with a truer spirit and clearer vision. Every revival has meant an approximation to the Christian ideal of life and conduct, and a raising of the moral standard as well as a quickening of the spiritual sense. The process in Churches and peoples is very much the same as that in the individual heart. Regeneration begins in the vision

of God, of sin, and in repentance. There are encouraging signs at the present time that the Churches are in the throes of such an experience. A new conscience is arising among them. There are the stirrings of a divine discontent, the beginnings of a genuine sense of sin. It is acknowledged on every hand that the Church is losing her hold of the masses of the people, and the fact is causing real searching of heart. It is acknowledged, too, that the Church fails to leaven the life of the world to any appreciable extent. She is learning a much needed lesson from the enthusiasm of the socialist movement, and she is beginning to understand that she must make her appeal with a like zeal and insistence. The tendency at the present time is to judge religion, like everything else, not by its theories but by its practice. Christianity must stand or fall in the estimation of many by the extent to which it realises its ideal, and confers upon men the blessings which it is understood to promise.

Without entering further into theological questions, it will be generally agreed that the application of the ethical teaching of Jesus Christ to modern conditions is a task that will try the faith and energy of the Christian Church to the utmost. So far as human relations are concerned the Christian ideal of brotherhood, of which we have already spoken, is practically a dead letter. Yet nothing is more obvious in the Churches of England and America at the present time than the desire to give practical expression to the teaching of Jesus in this respect. Even conservative and aristocratic Churches feel the stress of the democratic movement, and are stirred to put themselves into line with it, at least so far as lip-service is concerned. But it is just when we come to concert practical measures that the real difficulties begin. It is one thing to recognise the needs of the situation, but it is quite another thing

to persuade people to make the sacrifices necessary in order to meet them. There must be an entire change both in the attitude and methods of the organised Churches before they can be true to their professions. The experiments in communism made by the primitive Church were, no doubt, a dismal failure ; but they were at least an honest attempt to carry out the Christian ideal, and they built upon a true foundation. The modern Church starts too high, and has never quite rid herself of feudal and aristocratic notions. Even in the Churches whose organisation is confessedly democratic, money and social status count for far too much, and the poor have necessarily to take an inferior place. When disputes arise in which class interests are involved, it is not always obvious that the Churches are prepared to view them without prejudice. Too often they seem instinctively to range themselves on the side of the more favoured and influential sections of the community.

The remedy for this condition of things does not lie in merely stating the evil, still less in bringing railing accusations against those who are mainly responsible for it. The effort must be made to apply the doctrines taught to present conditions and to present-day needs. Modern civilisation is the product of a number of combined forces, economic, social, political, intellectual and the like. With the normal operation of these Christian morality has very little to do. Its influence is restricted to small circles, and even then it is not suffered to be very widely felt. The need of the movement is some more definite study of Christian principles in the light of modern conditions, and some organised attempt to apply them all round.

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