

What is Christianity?
The Letter Killeth but the Spirit Giveth Power

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No Date¹

What is Christianity? is a question that seems to be forcing its way to the front again, as it has done time and time again during the centuries since the disciples and followers of Jesus took of the work after Jesus' death. James and the group at Jerusalem gave one interpretation of it, still clinging to the old Jewish forms and insisting upon the ceremony of circumcision. Paul, on the other hand, held that it made no difference whether one was circumcised or not. To follow in spirit, to be justified by faith that was Christianity. Each succeeding generation made its interpretation as Christianity grew in numbers and power. Finally there came a time when the letter, the adherence to vow essential creeds, to forms, rituals and the sacraments had taken the Christian Church far away from the spirit of Christianity, that it became necessary to go back to the source and make a fresh investigation into the nature and power [of] that the [sic] great movement.

Wycliffe, Luther, Huss, Calvin and the reformers took up the task of freeing the spirit from the form. But it was not long before the spirit had become imprisoned in the forms of Protestantism. The Pilgrims and Puritans took up the work of the reformers, and brought the spirit of Christianity to this country. Here it has been subjected to several very severe cross examinations. In each one of these struggles the spirit has conquered over the letter, for the letter is already dead, and it is the attempt of the spirit to escape from the dead body of form that causes the struggles and disturbances which from time to time disturb the quiet of the religious world.

What is Christianity? is now coming to be a common question. The reason why this question is being asked with such seriousness today is perhaps more far-reaching than at

¹ While this sermon is not dated, almost certainly it is from the period 1905-06 when Earl Davis hand-wrote his sermons. In addition to the hand-writing, the paper is consistent with other datable sermons from that time.

any time since the early days of its new born freshness. That conception of Christianity, which looked upon it as a peculiar and special mechanism by which the few were to be saved from the general rack and ruin of the world, is no longer one to which men can or do adhere. It makes little or no difference whether it is the Catholic Church, the Protestant Bible, or the crucified Christ, or any other agency that is to be the centralizing power and expositor of that great mechanical device by which a few are to be saved, or all are to be saved. The distinction which formerly was current, the distinction between natural and supernatural, between natural and revealed religion can no longer be held to. If man is natural and Christianity is supernatural, why, of course the natural man cannot fathom its mysteries, and so far as this life is concerned he has nothing to do with it, for the natural man cannot penetrate that which is above and beyond the power of his natural capacities. Edwards and his followers saw that clearly and carried the doctrine to its logical conclusions, in asking the very fine distinction between the regenerate and the unregenerate. The doctrine of the election of the few to be saved by the free grace of God, and the absolute inability of man to do anything towards saving himself is the only consistent and rational position which a man can take if he makes any distinction between natural and supernatural religion. For if religion is supernatural, man in his natural state can have nothing to do with it. His natural powers do not permit him to enter into the realm of the supernatural. He must await the action of God's free grace for his regeneration, and the touch of the spirit that shall enter into him, and make him supernatural and reveal to him the secrets of the supernatural. It is this idea that is behind the doctrines of the Berkshire Divinity, with their ideas of man's absolute dependence upon God, and salvation by election, and man's inability to save himself.

But history has answered that doctrine of the distinction between natural and supernatural in religion. Whether it is true or not we cannot say. But the fact remains that men no longer believe it to be true. If man is natural, religion is natural. If religion is supernatural, man is supernatural. You may take whichever you choose. They mean the same, and the thing that they mean is this, that man has the religious impulse within him, and to some extent feels himself to be spiritually related to the unseen world about him.

One hundred and fifty years has seen a wide departure from the required theology of Calvinism, and its followers. The gradual weathering away of the old hard and fast lines has almost resulted in a complete demolition of the whole structure. We are now in the midst of a new problem. We are asking not "Is Christianity supernatural?" but "Is it natural?" Is it true to life? Is it capable of meeting the highest needs of man's life, and responding to the individual demands of man's nature for truth, goodness and beauty. In the long and at times heated discussions between science and religion, even the conservative apologists for religion have hardly attempted to reconcile natural science to religion. But they have been concerned with the task of reconciling the old interpretations of religion to what are the plain facts of science. In other words, they have been trying to show that Christianity is natural, and conforms to the laws of nature and the {??} in so far as we can discuss them. Today the methods of science, the principles which govern and control the scientist, and guide him in his investigations are accepted as final. I do not mean to say that certain theories are dogmatically held to be true, but the scientific habit of mind, the free and unprejudiced investigation and search after truth, and the use of that truth in arts and industry is no longer a cause pleading for recognition, but it is an established principle. Experiment and testing by actual fact, and accepting that which the experiments and tests point to as being true, that is the accepted standard of the world today. "Demonstrate the truth of your theory by an actual working test," says the world to the man who proposes a new theory. "If you can demonstrate, we will accept. If you cannot demonstrate, we will reject." It is just this test that the world today is exacting of Christianity. "We care not for your theories, your plans for salvation, your varied notions about this that and the other thing. Demonstrate to us the truth of your theories, prove your power to save, by saving; test your doctrines and historic claims by rigorous and strict examination. Prove that the Bible is inspired by its power of inspiring the world? "Prove all things hold fast to that which is true" said the apostle Paul, and the world is turning upon the Church and Christianity with some command.

What is Christianity? says the world. An answer is given by its defenders. "What will it do?" says the world. An answer is given by its defenders. "Very well," says the world, "demonstrate your claims."

Some very interesting and some very illuminating suggestions have been made of late as a result of well-known events. I venture to present one or two of these as representative of various answers which are being given in answer to the world's question, "What is Christianity?" This was apparently written recently, and was published in a recent number of "The Living Church."

Here a transcription of a column from "The Living Church:"

"A Christianity, says the Living Church, must, necessarily, hinge about the person of Jesus Christ. If it had to deal only with natural morality, it would be absurd to apply to it the epithet Christian. Morality did not enter the world with Christ. The Hebrew prophets cried out for it. The Psalmist extolled it. The synagogue worship inculcated it. The Ten Commandments enforced it. Greek philosophy dwelt upon its loveliness. Poets sang for it. A Christianity, therefore, based upon pure morality alone, is untenable. Morality is older than Christianity. A Christianity based upon the moral teaching of Jesus Christ alone is equally untenable. It cannot be demonstrated that that teaching introduced new elements into the moral law. Christianity is absolutely bound up with the successive dogmas which assert the unique position of Jesus Christ as God and man. We know that Jesus Christ is alone good, because he is Son of God; we never could know that he is Son of God because he was always good on earth, because the immaculate goodness cannot be proved apart from the sonship. Christianity therefore hinges neither upon the Sermon on the Mount, nor upon the Lord's prayer, nor upon the parable of the Prodigal Son. Each of these does indeed illuminate the Christian life; but no one of them is sufficient to stand as the cornerstone of Christianity. That corner-stone can be nothing less than the personality of Jesus Christ. Now the personality of Jesus Christ is only

sufficient to bear up the structure if it be unique wholly beyond comparison with the x [sic] of human kind. Mere goodness is not sufficient; natural morality will not do it; beautiful principles of ethics are wholly insufficient. Christianity rests on Jesus Christ: but it rest upon him as Son of God. Light of Light: of one substance with the Father; conceived by the Holy Ghost; born of the Virgin Mary; living, dying, rising in the fulness both of his godhead and of his manhood from the dead; ascended into heaven; reigning eternally at the right hand of God. Nothing less than this is a sufficient foundation for Christianity. Follow the agnostic argument today and see how easily overthrown is a Christianity based on morality alone. Christianity is a life, based upon a life. Nothing less is Christianity. And so the creeds are no mere summaries of human deductions from natural hypotheses. As such they could have no value. They would be unworthy [of] the subscription of an intelligent man. The mere fact that the church pledges her children to belief in the creeds shows that she has no such conception of their function. It would be an insult to 20th century intelligence to bind it to fourth-century speculations. If there were a single speculative hypothesis in the creeds, it would be intellectual tyranny to demand subscription to them. But the creeds state the essence of Christianity. Each fact, thus stated in irreducible language, transcends human knowledge. The wisest man does not comprehend all that it involves. But all that it involves is forever bound up with Christianity. Christianity defined can be no less than the sum total of the creeds."

I do not presume to pass judgement for you, but as for myself, I cannot believe that "Christianity defined can be no less than the sum total of the creeds." It is for you to say whether or not it is true to your experience. But it is interesting to point out the historical fact, that there

are no creeds in the New Testament, and certainly not until the third and possibly not until the fourth century do they appear when the life, and spiritual vigor of the Christian Church had given away to form. If it is true that Jesus, the founder of Christendom, intended to have such a statement as we find in the creeds as the test of being a Christian, why do they not appear somewhere in the New Testament?

That is a sample of one group of answers that are being given today in answer to the question, "What is Christianity?"

But of course these are not the ideas of the modern man even in a conservative church. They represent the ideas of the reactionists who recoil from the pressing questions that are being put to them. They are like the woman who stood braced against the side of the station, while the train which she wished to take moved off and left her standing there. "I thought the whole concern was going." said the amazed old lady. These creeds, these systems of theology are the stations at which the great on-moving train of Christian spirituality has stopped for a moment to take on passengers. They are stationary, and one who stands upon the platform of these stations, may expect as the simple old lady did, to have the whole thing move on. But as a matter of fact the stations remain behind while the train moves on.

But there is another type of answer that is being given today to the question, "What is Christianity?" Those who have a deep reverence for the old forms and old statements because of their associations, because of their close relations to the events of the Christian Church, are averse to dropping the old forms, and substituting new interpretations in their places. Such ones realize that we do not and cannot take these statements literally. They do not accept them intellectually. But rather use them sentimentally for old association's sake. Into these old bottles they put new wine, and delight in the long train of associations which keep inviolate the historic continuity of the forms as well as the spirit of the Church. They welcome new truth, new ideas, new forms and in every way take delight in filling the old bottles with the new wine. Inwardly they are the very spirit of the free truth-seeking atmosphere of the life of Jesus, a power for truth and righteousness in the world. As an illustration of this type

of answer let me quote some passages from an address of one of the foremost of these.

There are two essentials of Christianity. The first is the reverent recognition of the Great Good Will, which has its way for every word we speak and every deed we do. This will takes many forms to meet the varying circumstances of life, kindness, patience, modesty, charity, honest, truth, pity, cheerfulness, temperance, courage and the like. The man who tries to observe them all as different phases and expressions of the One Good Will has the first of the two essentials of Christianity. The second essential of Christianity is the democratic attitude toward other people. To fall short of the democratic attitude toward the humblest and worst of our fellow men, is to fall short of the reverent attitude toward the Great Good Will, which includes the welfare of lowest equally with the highest, or the worst no less than the best.

Here, you see, is the utmost frankness in expressing the essentials of Christianity. There is nothing dogmatic, nothing bigoted or narrow, nothing which smacks of ancient conceptions, nothing which denies the freedom of the individual to think, and investigate for himself.

But this same writer passes from this exposition of the essentials of Christianity to put some of his new wine into the old bottles. For example, he says,

Is Jesus Christ the divine Son of God, and the Savior of the World? Yes. Because in precept and example, in life and death, he was implicitly obedient to the Great Good Will, and included the lowest and worst in his sympathy and service. Measured by these essential tests, Jesus stands forth as supremely divine.

Are we saved by the sacrifice of Christ? Yes. For no man, from Christ to his humblest disciple can do the good will, and try really to serve others without suffering the enmity and hate of the selfish and sinful, with whose schemes the just and generous Christian man is bound to interfere.

It would be delightful to think that such clean sparkling wine always filled those old bottles. But everyone knows

that such is not the truth. One is really reminded of that figure which Jesus used about new patches on old clothes, much rather it is a new lining to the old outside.

Of course one does not wish to say that such clinging to old forms is bad. But there is an element of danger in such a use of language. It not only destroys the original meaning of the terms, but in fact it involves and distorts the real truth of the life and way of living that one is trying to present. It is very much as if we should still continue to call the head of the democratic nation a King or to permit or to compel our President to wear a crown, as a symbol of the ancient conception of the Divine right to rule. It would be a misuse of words and symbols, and lead to a misunderstanding on the part of those who did not fully understand.

On the other hand, there are those who look upon the old forms and symbols as of great interest and significance historically. They have a deep reverence for them as symbols which interpreted great truths to an age that is now past. In fact they have too much reverence for them to subject them to daily use and commit them to the repair shop of modern theology.

Take the spirit of Christianity leave the old forms that we cannot use without mutilating them as monuments of those who also tried to enter into the spirit of Christianity. and in this spirit meet the needs and demands of our time with all the wisdom and all the power and devotion that we have. Whatever form Christianity may take upon itself, as colorings of the particular age in which one happens to examine it, its spirit, its essential and fundamental ideas are the same. The fusion of the Greek genius for thinking and philosophical investigation, and scientific sprit of study, with the Jewish genius for religious worship, in the midst of the great world of Rome, makes the origin of Christianity. The spirit of truth from Greece. The spirit of worship from Israel. The spirit of activity and service from Rome. All melted together into one great movement of Christendom. The first prophet and teacher was Jesus of Nazareth. In him we find the great fountainhead of the new movement. In his spirit of common-sense observations, in his habit of testing his truth by actual life, regardless of the traditional teachings of his people, he is the incarnation of the Greek genius. As the writer of John puts in presenting to us the incarnation of the Greek Logos in

Jesus, "The word became flesh." In his implicit trust in God, the Father whom he saw not only on high, but in the beauties of nature and in the secrets of his inner life and in the very nature of the human soul, he was the embodiment of the Jewish genius of worshipping. In his noble and simple ministrations to the poor and needy wherever he found them he translated into its finest form the genius to activity which the Roman world gave to modern civilization. The subtle influences of the one nation upon the other was bound to produce a new and modified and essentially different group within their midst which should embody the genius of each. The first great prophet and teacher was Jesus of Nazareth. To his spiritual power, to his inquiring spirit, to active ministrations, many responded. Just as we speak of Lincoln as the first American, the first great citizen, to embody in his life the national characteristics of North, South, East and West, so Jesus was the first great teacher who was the incarnation of the great amalgamation of forces which were being fused into one power in those days.

To worship God the father, to seek zealously after his truth, and to translate that truth into the beauty of a noble life, this is the great spiritual power of Christianity. Those who live in this spirit of the life of Jesus who declared in no uncertain terms that on the two commandments, "Thou shalt love the Lord, thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all [thy] mind," and "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," hangeth the whole law and the prophets.

So follow: to defend, to apologize for the letter of Christianity, is the most deadly work that one can do. But to live in its spirit forever leads us nearer to truth, to God, and to the heart of man. Thus did Paul seek to follow in Jesus's spirit, for he knew as he has told us that "the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life."