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*“ The Entrance of THY WORDS Giveth Light ”*

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*Editor:* A. McDONALD REDWOOD

# The Bible Student

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## MUCH SERVING

By the late Sir Wm. ROBERTSON NICOLL

Never before in the history of the Church has it appeared so active. At home and abroad we find Christians pre-occupied with the great business of doing good. Yet one question recurs insistently. *Is all this eager work for Christ succeeding as it ought to succeed?* Why do our own efforts again and again prove ineffectual? Why do they sometimes sink into mechanical routine, which becomes a barrenness and a bondage? Our Lord has called us to His service, which is perfect freedom; but too often we turn it into a yoke which is not easy and a burden which is not light.

*Most modern Christians are made captive by religious organization.* We admit, of course, that organization is a necessary evil: yet certain branches and departments of it assuredly seem more evil and less necessary. *Divine results do not depend upon elaborate human apparatus.* Indeed, the grace of God shows a curious preference for methods that are *simple and channels that are unexpected.* When costly aqueducts crumble and run dry, behold, in the wilderness waters break forth and streams in the desert. For practical purposes, however, Christians are compelled to organize. We can hardly help being entangled in a network of societies and institutions. Many of us dissipate and distract our souls at endless conferences and committees. We are careful and anxious over all manner of claims and causes. We grow jaded in spirit, we lose our inward freshness and glee and zest, because we are cumbered with much serving. Samuel Butler in his "Erewhon" drew the picture of a civilization where men had become the slaves of their own machines. Christian ministers, harassed by so many meetings, understand how the same thing may happen with our modern machinery for doing good.

Numbers of earnest people today make a kind of fetish of their religious and philanthropic activity. *They are feverishly busy at the task of improving the world.* They admire themselves because they feel that they are doing so much. Persons of this type must have suggested to Swedenborg a grim episode in his vision of hell. He describes how in hell he saw one region where everybody was incessantly employed in trying to make everybody else virtuous. We know by experience that, when we combine in Christian service, we do not thereby escape from vulgar temptations and ambitions. Perhaps there are special devils which haunt conventions and committee-rooms. The officials of religious societies may develop all the vices of the bureaucrat. *Indeed, religious work itself is a sphere in which love of power, and vanity and gadding about, and excitement, and self-importance can find full scope in the path of duty.* "Work," as a wise man wrote, "is the DAGON of today. Instead of being a witness to our faith in the GOD in Whose name we do it, it is too often a vast monument of our disbelief in His ability to do without us."

There was a popular evangelistic hymn which affirmed that "doing is a deadly thing, doing ends in death." Now the truth at the back of those words is a truth which covers not only the unconverted but every Christian worker who grows absorbed in the sacred task of serving his fellowmen. Salvation comes by faith, not by works. That root-principle holds good for the collective activities of the Church, as well as for each single penitent soul. The supreme business of the redeemed Church is not work, but worship—not philanthropy, but adoration—not "doing things," but bearing exultant witness to what Christ has done and is doing eternally. Those mighty promises and warnings and commandments in the New Testament which apply to the individual disciple, apply also to the Christian community. Christ forbids His Church to take anxious thought for its food, or its raiment or its revenue, or its future fortunes. The Church as a whole must not trouble about the morrow, nor fret and worry about all those things which the Gentiles seek after. The Church must learn to live on the lily and sparrow footing and be free from carefulness about money, and seek to lay up not endowments on earth but treasure in heaven. *The Church will conquer the world by daring to be utterly unworldly.* The Church can overcome evil with good, when it has faith to oppose evil with sheer and simple goodness, and with nothing else at all.

One characteristic monument of the Reformation is known as the Heidelberg Catechism. When we study that Catechism, it is startling to find the whole content of Christian ethics comprised under the heading of "Gratitude." The great Reformers realized vividly that our good works are powerless and lifeless and worthless, unless they proceed naturally and spontaneously *from our passion of thankfulness for what Christ has done for us and for all men.* Our religious activities have no value, except in so far as they form a practical *Te Deum* for the blessings of redemption. In the *Te Deum* itself you do not hear one syllable about what people now call Christian work. But the soul from which virtue goes out to help and heal others is a soul overflowing continually with wonder, love and praise. Because far beyond and above all that we may *do* for any person is that which we may *be* to that person. The one thing indispensable in the service of CHRIST we can learn nowhere else *except at His feet.* Here is the spiritual secret which makes a saint so potent for the highest good. For it is true of a saint that "the least of his words and actions may be of more vital effect in the world than the life's labour of any of the herd of benevolent people who are busied about much serving." Our LORD said concerning His chosen friends: "For their sakes I sanctify, I consecrate, Myself." Even when we set apart all that was unique in His self-consecration—all that He alone could, once for all, achieve—those solemn words come home to every disciple: *For their sakes I consecrate myself.* We consecrate our time to Christian service, we consecrate our gifts: do we consecrate our *inmost selves?* There is nothing else on earth like the power of personal holiness over the lives which it touches—no influence so potent, so penetrating, so inexhaustible. The saints judge the world already. When we watch, we discover that the salt and light of any organization for doing good generally proceed from some pure and humble character who is redeemed from self-seeking.

Half of our Christian activity has this canker at its root—that even in doing Christ's work we are not delivered from self-regard. We are still concerned about our own importance, our reputations. An observer who stood outside the Church once declared that "a man can do a great deal of good in the world, if only he does not care who gets the credit for it." Do we still hunger after some credit for our personal toil and patience and sacrifice?

Are we never jealous when our fellow-labourers obtain recognition which we deserve, and receive praise which in fairness ought to fall to our share? The Buddhist is always striving to "acquire merit." Not a few zealous Christians seem to feel that by their works of faith and labours of love they have *some-how acquired merit*. But He, who knows man's bias to self-flattery, warns us against this deadly snare. A modern teacher has paraphrased our LORD's stern warning:—"Performance of duty is no merit. Do faithfully and punctiliously all that God commands thee to do: and after thou hast achieved that which thou well knowest none save thyself has ever achieved, thou art nevertheless an unprofitable servant. *Thou hast not exceeded thy duty*. Nay, if thou indeed believe that thou hast performed thy *whole* duty, thou art judged already: for thou hast judged thyself."

In a few brief years we shall have forgotten to care about men's dispraise or misjudgment. After a little while prophecies will fail and tongues will cease and knowledge will vanish, and our institutions and organizations will melt and disappear with the rest of time's dreams. But one Presence abides and will never vanish. One Love we can never lose. That good part which by God's grace belongs to the humble heart already, is so good because in God's mercy it shall never be taken away.

## CHRIST IN THE FOUR GOSPELS

### II. The Four Gospels and their Writers

BY A. NAISMITH, M.A.

A discussion as to the authorship and authenticity of the Gospels is irrelevant to the purpose of these studies. For us it is sufficient that from the second century onward they have been accepted as the genuine writings of the four men whose names they bear. In studying a book it is always helpful to ask, and try to find an answer to, such questions as—Who wrote it? For whom did he write? When and where was it written? And why and how? In the case of the Synoptic Gospels the time and place of writing cannot be determined with certainty. All three were written before the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. John's narrative came later, almost certainly in the last decade of the first century, and it was probably written at Ephesus.