

The Grace of God and Free Churchmanship.

I BELIEVE in the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ and by that grace and because of that grace I am what I am—a Free Churchman. I can see how I might have started from say the sovereignty of God and arrived at a different kind of Churchmanship. But for me the quest for religion is hopeless apart from the grace of God. Man can never, by seeking, find God unless God first of all seeks man. By no merit, no magic, no desire of our own can we find Him unless He takes the initiative. He comes—is ever-coming—to awake sonship and liberty and holiness.

Unless I cling to that, the possibility of my understanding religion goes and any churchmanship I may have I must base on that. It is useless for us to continue as Free Churches unless we are based on a foundation that is positive, catholic and divine. No Church can live on its opposition to other Churches. We cannot feed ourselves by trying to starve other people, or build our own Churches by pulling other people's Churches down. We cannot account for Martin Luther by his opposition to the Pope, more than we can account for a river's progress by its opposition to the pebbles. The springs of Protestantism are in Luther's vision of Christ and not in his vision of the Pope. In Jesus Christ he gained for himself a gracious God—God made Himself known to him by His benefits—by His saving grace, and "the will of the everlasting God stood before him in the historically active will of this man." In the same way the Nonconformity of 1662 did not spring from opposition to the Stuarts. Charles the Second could not produce a religion of any kind. I remember Charles Brown saying to me among the cloisters of Oxford—what fools our fathers were to leave all this, and my replying, what a great thing they must have seen to do it. It is this great thing which was nothing less than a dim vision of the redeeming grace of God that made them face persecution and loss. I want to recall this vision if I can. It is the vision of God approaching man—of the activity of divine grace shaping personalities and creating society. The recreated personality is a Christian, and the re-shaped society is a Church

—and anything in my character that is not of the making of Christ must be discarded, and anything in my church that is not of His shaping must be scrapped. With reverence and humility let it be stated that there is only one reason for being a Free Churchman, and that is the grace of our Jesus Christ.

Christianity under any definition is the application of the life of God to the life of man. It is God's life through Jesus influencing the human race and the influence is always moral and never magical—always human in its love and not inhuman in its coerciveness. It is often a wonder to me that God's personality does not smite me with paralysis and that the God-man does not come with signs in the heavens above and terrors on the earth beneath. But in the words of Browning:

God, whose pleasure brought
Man into being, stands far away
As if it were a hairbreadth off—to give
Room for the newly-made to live.

God has deigned to save the world, but he has deigned to save it in the ways of freedom. It is evident from the story of the Temptation that other methods passed through the mind of our Lord—the methods in vogue in His day, and the methods not unfamiliar in our own. Bread-making or the power of the purse—sensationalism or the power of miracle and magic—militarism or the power of the state—but He casts them all aside with utter scorn and faces Calvary and the Cross. And what amazes me is that His temptations are the temptations of every Christian worker and every Christian Church. But rather than use force and not freedom, magic and not love, self-interest and not truth, He sacrificed His life. He died to make men free. Frankly I cannot conceive of Christianity without accepting freedom as embedded in its very foundations and enwoven into its very texture. Freedom is indispensable to the moulding of the Christian Church.

Freedom to us is what episcopacy is to the Anglo-Catholics. As they say: "No Bishop, no Church," so we say, "No freedom, no Church and no saint." In discussing the Free Church position with Christians of other communities, I have found that it is at this point that the cleavage strikes down to the foundations and stretches from the heights above to the depths beneath. The difference is not that of mere method or mere dogma, but of a fundamental philosophy and a viewpoint of the universe. Am I a passive tool to be moulded by my environment whether that environment be a world or a church, or am I a creative personality, a person in a world of persons, and not a thing in a world of things? Does baptism create faith or does faith create baptism? Do forms and rites make religion, or does

religion create its ritual as gladness in the heart creates a smile on the face? Does the bread and wine make the communion, or does the communion use the bread and wine? When Father Adderly, in lecturing at Bloomsbury, pleaded for the need for Ritualism, I assured him to his surprise that we Free Churchmen were inveterate Ritualists only we made our Ritualism as we went along. I do not say but that too often we use stereotyped forms, but that is always because our life is too feeble to create forms of its own. Henry Ward Beecher declared he could no more use prescribed forms of prayer than he could woo his wife with his grandfather's love-letters. He might derive valuable hints from their perusal—but it would be a poor love that could not express itself effectively. When I want to cultivate the mood of prayer, I read books of devotion—but when I pray, truly pray, it is in poor stammering, broken words of my own. George Russell, a high churchman, in his *Life of Gladstone*, tells us that although the great statesman was a ritualist, yet when he was engaged in prayer, when he was *solus cum solo*, his ritualism was utterly forgotten. I do not undervalue the place of environment. No man can escape out of it—but the only use of environment is to give us the chance of conquering it and the only use of ritualism is to enable us to do without it. This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. It is not sheer perversity, it is not an obstinate adherence to a pack of peccadilloes that makes us Free Churchmen, but a philosophy of life that penetrates down to the root of things. While others put the emphasis on environment and drill, we put the emphasis on life and liberty. To quote Gladstone again, on one occasion he stated that the question at issue at the time of the Reformation was whether liberty was essential to the development of character or not. Catholicism answered with an unmistakable No; Protestantism said, Yes, hesitantly at first, but more decisively afterwards. There is no hesitancy or stammer about the Free Church answer. We reply with a decisive and emphatic yes, and stake our bottom dollars on freedom. God forbid that I should find fault with anybody's religion. But to be moral I must be free. To be a Christian I must be free. To be the member of any Church, I must be free. I may be sadly defective, but I can only pray and worship and serve when I am free.

“My Kingdom,” says our Lord, “is not of this world.” There were a number of societies in existence in the world at His time and they all had their place in the providence of God. But his Kingdom was a society of a higher type and a different spirit. It did not use the force of the Roman Empire, or the diplomacy of the Greek states. It did not use the magic of

the mystery cults and it had no place for the cupidity and graft of the commercial guilds and combines. The New Jerusalem came down from above. It did not creep up from below, or come in through the back, or through the side, or the front door. It was something unique—something above the level and beyond the reach of the world. Listen to the words of its Founder. "The Kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, but let it not be so among you. He that is greatest among you let him be the servant of all. Do not love the uppermost room at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and be called of men Doctor, Doctor—for one is your Master, even Christ, and all ye are brethren; and call no man father upon the earth, for one is your Father which is in heaven." These words are not meaningless. They were uttered during the most critical and solemn moment in our Lord's history, and they were meant to show the difference between the road to Calvary and the Cross, and the road to Rome and the purple. Our Lord either meant what He said or He didn't. If He didn't where are we—and, if He did, again, where are we? Far away and far below—all of us. The world gives us honour—the state gives us recognition. But the only honour we crave is the honour of saving the world; and the only position we seek is the position of saving the state. The most searching sermon delivered to our age is in a novel by Dostoevsky. The Lord Jesus returns to Seville at the time of the Inquisition. The Arch Inquisitor finds that His presence upsets all his ambitions and organisations, and he promptly claps Him in prison. But at midnight he visits Him before he burns Him in the morning. "Why art Thou come to hinder us? Thou camest to give freedom and love to men, but men were not fit for such gifts. The project was a failure and ended in death and disaster. But we have introduced more effective methods. We have introduced force and plausibility and diplomacy. We have taught them that it is not freedom and love that matter, but a mystery which they must follow blindly even against their conscience. We have corrected Thy work and have founded it upon miracle, mystery and authority. Thy gifts of love and freedom are too terrible for ordinary folk. To-morrow I shall burn Thee." Christ never uttered a word, but kissed him on his pale and bloodless lips. The Inquisitor shuddered. Then he opened the door and turned to Christ, "Go, and come no more. Come not at all, never, never." Dostoevsky is fair, almost partial, to the Arch Inquisitor, but it is a terrible picture he paints, a picture of a Church in which Christ is intolerable, a picture of a Christianity which bids its Lord depart. Alas! we, too, have been stained by the dust of party politics—we, too, have caught the ways of

the world and coveted the favour of the great. But we are far from saying to Jesus, "Go and come back never, never," and blessed be His name, He kisses us to pledge us again to a greater love, and to consecrate us again to a richer freedom. We are not in a position to say—ours is the ideal Christian Church. I have never known an unadulterated Free Church yet. Thank God I have known thousands of people who are trying hard to be Free Churchmen. Like the Oxford heroes I have mentioned already—we have seen something and we are out to create it. But in Dostoevsky's words—freedom is a terrible gift. But neither we, nor, in the long run, humanity, can be satisfied with anything less. And ours is the stupendous task to build a City of God whose gates shall be freedom and whose walls shall be love.

Now there are other Christians who do not understand Christ in this way, and there are other sheep which are not of this fold. What is to be the attitude of Free Churchmen to Churchmen who choose other adjectives than our own. We give them our all—the two possessions we value most—freedom and love—the greatest freedom and the sincerest love.

Absolute freedom to work out their own Churchmanship. They may excommunicate us, but we refuse to excommunicate them. They may bar us from their pulpits—but our pulpits must be always open to them. They may refuse us Communion, but they are ever welcome at the Lord's Table in our meeting places. We dare not withhold from any Christian the freedom we claim ourselves. There are three things which make me proud of being a Baptist, and they are not the usual ones. We were the first according to David Masson in his celebrated *Life of Milton* to declare in favour of absolute liberty of conscience to all—Jews and Papists alike. Masson says he cannot read that declaration without feeling a throb, and he was not a Baptist and I am. But in that sense all Free Churchmen are Baptists to-day, and there is nothing more repellent to us than to encroach upon the religious liberties of our fellow men. The freedom we claim for ourselves we ungrudgingly cede to others.

Then love compels us to seek the utmost unity with all our fellow Christians. We regard it a fundamental Christian duty to work with all the followers of Jesus as far as our conscience will allow, and as far as their tolerance will permit. But we do not mistake unity for uniformity. Our love makes us eager for unity but our liberty makes us fight shy of uniformity. You can make machines uniform by means of mass production, but create personalities and create Churches never. Uniformity is the outcome of drill; unity is the outcome of life. And the higher the life the less the capacity for uniformity. It belongs

to machines and pebbles and the middle ages. It does not belong to thought and growth and progress, as the very conditions of effective thinking clearly indicate. Think of the conditions of knowledge. An infant looks out upon the world and sees everything uniform and homogeneous, everything much of a muchness. Then the mind awakes and the world is broken up into separate objects. Everything is seen to stand out in clear distinctiveness and complete isolation from everything else—is, in fact, sectarianised. But we do not stop there. As we discover the deeper meaning of the objects around us, we find they are bound together into the unity we call the universe. The superficial uniformity in which there appeared to be no differences, has given place to a rich unity in which is the greatest possible variety. Uniformity comes through slurring differences; unity comes from understanding and appreciating them. Neither a thing, nor a person, nor a Church will unite unless it is given the full right of being different. It is no good to be impatient and endeavour to over-rule this law by which the mind of man thinks and by which the world is constituted. So while unity is the imperative goal of love, we as Free Churchmen can best secure it by being uncompromisingly true to the spiritual principles we hold. To sacrifice a genuine principle is to hinder unity. The best way in which I can help the reunion of the Churches, is by being a true Baptist—and that is equally true of the Methodist and the Anglo-Catholic. Explore your own mine—delve down into the richest seams and work out your spiritual ore to the full, and give freedom to other miners to do the same and love them all the time. In one part of our country there was a cluster of private mines employing a large number of men at a good wage, and producing coal at a good profit. A group of financiers in their eagerness to form a monopoly bought them all up at extravagant prices, and now the pound shares are down at two and six. All the Churches of Christendom are digging coal for the Kingdom of God. I may form a combine to secure a world monopoly for the Baptists, but the inevitable results would be that the spiritual shares would sink from twenty shillings to half-a-crown. Let us spend less time in Trade Union meetings and stay at home to dig coal. Let us work at our own mines and we shall discover that we possess all the spiritual treasures which we are supposed to miss. We have not fewer sacraments than other Churches but more. The chariots of the Lord are ten thousand times ten thousand. There are no Gentile firs or Pagan pines and all the grass is Christian. We have one sacrament which we have spoiled by transubstantiation—I mean preaching—"the sacrament of the word" as Martin Luther called it. Just as the Romanists have

turned the Presence of our Lord into material bread and wine, so we have turned preaching into lectures and essays and patter. That is the Nonconformist heresy of transubstantiation. For consider—the real purpose of preaching is to open our people's minds to the Real Presence of the Redeeming God who is eager and mighty to save. It is not the sermon which converts—a mere sermon never converted anybody. It is God who saves and the sermon only awakes people to the fact that He is present to do it. I have no fear of Protestantism except at this point. The Romanist has his Mass, and howsoever much we disbelieve in it—the Catholics go away from Church every Sunday with the persuasion that they have met God, while our people go very often with the poor satisfaction that they have heard an eloquent sermon. If Protestantism is to flourish—the speaking one must find his point again, and the sacrament of the word of God must be re-established. Then no devout Catholic believes more firmly in the Real Presence at the Lord's Table than we do. We absolutely believe what he believes—only in a spiritual and universal sense. After the same manner we believe in Apostolical succession. The spiritual influence which the Lord imparted to the disciples, has come down the ages through all kinds of moral and spiritual channels—through mothers as well as popes—through saints as well as potentates—through laymen as well as priests. We believe in Apostolical succession if you make the succession to be the succession of goodness, and you make the channels to be the lives of all believers. As Free Churchmen we are not afraid of priests if you define a priest as you cannot help defining him, as a man who loves his fellow men enough to intercede for them. A priest is a lover who prays, and in all conscience the more priests and lovers of humanity the better. We believe in the priesthood of all believers. I admit that we often woefully fall short of carrying out our own ideals, but when men charge us of holding a mutilated faith, I am tempted to reply, "We try to believe all that you believe only we do so in a bigger way." I suspect every religious doctrine I cannot make universal; and I suspect every religious rite that I cannot make ethical. Let us make our Free Churchmanship spiritual and universal enough and we shall be danger-free from mutilation and starvation.

Freedom is not the content of Christianity—it is only the form. The content is holy love, and Jesus is the Grace of God saving and reshaping human lives. God is Love. Jesus is that love with human hands stretched out to save, and Christian character is that love appropriated by faith, and the Christian Church is that love passed on to others, linking itself to others in fellowship and service. This love determines my attitude to

everyone else. It is the one rock on which the Church is built. Not only must I forgive as I am forgiven, not only must I help as I am helped, but my love must regard my fellow man as God's love regards me, that is as a sacred personality—never as a means but always as an end. God's love comes to me and I become a son and not a servant. My love goes out to another and he becomes not my servant but my brother, not my dependant, but my comrade. I don't produce parasites by the grace of God—I grow trees. I am sick of making converts and adding units to statistics or hangers-on to my system. My duty is to start men in the King's business on their own account, able to think and act for themselves. The love of God passed on to others creates a comradeship of free independent personalities, and that is the Christian Church. The words of our Lord are explicit. If two of you agree—symphonise—are in tune, "Where two or three are gathered together in My name"—the name of Love—"There am I in the midst of them." That, as Dr. Dale maintained, is the charter of the Christian Church, and I wish he were back at the present juncture. Dr. Parker scorned the idea of two or three persons starting a Church in his back garden. But it is not statistics that make a Church. You may have two, or two hundred, or two million. It is the Shekinah of love, the agreement of love, the concerted purpose of love, and with this present two or three in Dr. Parker's back garden would be more effective than three thousand in the City Temple without. It is not pomp and organisation and finance and statistics that make a Church, but the spiritual values stressed by our Lord. The love of God comes to me, and the same love comes to the two others, or to the two hundred others, or to the two million others, and in virtue of that love we agree, or to transliterate, we symphonise. We are in tune because Jesus Christ leads the choir, and what the others will I will, and what I will they will. The will of the Church is my will, and my will is the will of the Church. With the fullest freedom and with eager consent I accept the will of the community as my own because it is the will of God in all of us. I find my love in freedom, and I find my freedom in love. If freedom is absent love is stunted, and if love is absent freedom is cramped. So my Churchmanship is the completest blend of unrestricted freedom and undefeated love.

So without any feeling towards our fellow Christians except to wish them freedom and send them love, here by the grace of God we stand and we can do no other. Freedom is indispensable to the individual—love is indispensable to society. It is a sore temptation to seek to make men religious without allowing them to be free. But there is plenty of evidence in the

past that men will sacrifice their churchianity rather than surrender their freedom. It is an equally sore temptation to seek to make society stable and orderly by means of force and legislation. Especially is this true in the time of panic and bankruptcy. Birds in a storm will seek the shelter of the cage and the trap. Italy turns to Mussolini, and distracted men turn to an infallible church, but force is no remedy either in Church or state. But it requires courage to be a free citizen and a Free Churchman. When I am pessimistic I foresee that the task is proving too arduous for Nonconformity. I see our people giving up their liberty bit by bit. Freedom is not worth the risk—love is not worth the sacrifice. When I am optimistic I see Roman Catholicism adding to its treasures freedom and brotherhood. But whether the Free Churches fall or the Roman Catholic Churches rise, I have no doubt about the Kingdom of God and the Church of the future. There shall arise a Church of the free, a republic of Christian brothers, for freedom and love are as the air invulnerable, and as the roots of the great mountains fundamental, not only perennial needs of humanity, but the integral principles of the revelation of Christ.

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