

healthy and spontaneous. Ideally a more perfect concord, a more complete assent and consent are to be desired. But, if this in this world is unattainable, Christians should, at any rate, be thankful that there is a fundamental unity, while each Christian community is striving and praying for what it believes to be the "most excellent way."



What is Christianity?

BY THE REV. BARTON R. V. MILLS, M.A.

IV. THE CHRISTIANITY OF THE LATER APOSTOLIC AGE.

I.

THE death of St. Paul marks an epoch in the history of the Apostolic age. It not only removed the most commanding personality of the period, the man to whom more than to any other the Church owes her constitution and her creeds—it nearly coincided in time with three things, each of which exercised the greatest influence on the course of Christian history.

1. The first of these was the adoption by the Roman Government of an attitude of avowed hostility to the Christian religion. During the Pentecostal and Pauline periods this hostility does not appear. The persecutions to which the Apostles were subjected were almost always instigated by the Jews. The attitude of the Roman authorities was always impartial, and not unfrequently friendly. On the whole, the Apostles had more protection than punishment from the officials of the empire. But in A.D. 64 this attitude was altered. In that year Nero tried to throw on to the Christians the responsibility for the fire at Rome, of which he was himself probably the author. This was the signal for an outburst of violence against the Christian religion, which is generally known as the Neronian persecution. It used to be supposed that this

lasted for some three or four years, and was succeeded by a period of peace, until the flames of persecution shot forth again under Domitian in A.D. 95. But Professor Ramsay has given strong reasons for his view that from the time of Nero persecution never really ceased, though it was intermittent and local.¹ There was, however, an important change in its character. At first the forms of law were at least nominally observed. Christians were punished for some alleged violation of the civil law, of which they were legally, though unjustly, convicted. They were not punished for the fact of being Christians. This was a later development, which Professor Ramsay assigns to the reign of Vespasian (A.D. 69-79), and which he holds to have been political in its motive. The important thing to remember is that throughout the period covered by this paper Christianity was at least a suspected, and generally a persecuted, religion. This circumstance had necessarily a powerful influence on the religious literature of the period.

2. The second important event was the capture of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple by Titus in A.D. 70 some three years after the probable date of St. Paul's death. The record of that siege and of the war which led to it belongs to Jewish and Roman rather than to Christian history. Its influence on the history of the Church was immediate and permanent. It did not indeed destroy the Christian Church in Jerusalem, nor did it efface the distinctions which had always existed between Jewish and Gentile Christianity. But the destruction of the Temple and the consequent cessation of its sacrifices completely altered the view which Christians of Jewish origin took of the character and future of the Church. From A.D. 70 that Church "knew that it was the true Israel of God, the religious society approved by Him, which had replaced the theocracy, and was thus itself compelled definitely to replace the institutions of the past."² It is clear that this would tend to accentuate the separation between Jewish and Gentile

¹ "The Church and the Roman Empire," chaps. xi. and xii.

² De Pressensé, "Siècle Apostolique," ii. 366.

Christianity, and to deepen the impression already growing among the Romans that they had to face a new and world-wide religion, not merely a Jewish sect. And it would also conduce to the definition by the Church of its own principles with ever-diminishing regard to their relation to those of Judaism.

3. Such were the causes which acted on the Church from without. Another of a different kind influenced it from within. This was the growth of false doctrine as to the Person and work of Christ. Such error had made its appearance during the lifetime of St. Paul, and is dealt with by him in his later Epistles. But after his death it became much more pronounced. It generally took one of two forms, known respectively as the Ebionite and Gnostic heresies. The former was certainly Judaic in its origin. Its upholders held that our Lord was the son of Joseph and Mary, and therefore was merely man. Some of them admitted His miraculous birth, but denied His pre-existence. The leader of the Ebionites was one Cerinthus, who was the great opponent of St. John. The Gnostics were a body of mystics, who held that knowledge was the principle of religion, and claimed a special *γνώσις* of their own. They held that one Infinite Being existed from all eternity, from whom emanated certain "aeons," or inferior beings. The material world was the creation of a rebellious Demiurge, to counteract whose work the aeon Christ descended into the man Jesus at His Baptism. Some of these heretics held that His Body and sufferings were only apparent, from which tenet they were called Docetæ. Simon Magus is said to have been the originator of Gnosticism; but the founders of the chief Gnostic sects were various heretics of the second century. Gnostic opinions were, however, rife in the later Apostolic Age, and the Gnostic and Ebionite heresies had much in common. These were the false doctrines which the teachers of the last quarter of the first century had to meet.

II.

Under these circumstances it was to be expected that this last part of the Apostolic age would witness an advance in Christian thought as marked as that which the Pauline period had made on the teaching of the Pentecostal Church.

The first step in this doctrinal development is taken in the Epistle to the Hebrews. The one thing that is fairly certain about this inspired writing is that it is not the work of St. Paul. We seem as far as ever from any conclusion as to its authorship. It can hardly have been written before the death of the Apostle; and if Bishop Westcott is right in his opinion that it must have been written while the Temple was still standing, the date of its composition is fixed within very narrow limits. In that case it is certainly the earliest document of the period now under review. Its main subject is the reality of Christ's abiding Priesthood. It shows that sacrifice—though without bloodshedding—is a permanent institution in the Christian Church, and that our Lord is the great High Priest. It thus attaches even greater importance than St. Paul had done to the Ascension of Christ and to His work in heaven. So it is to that great event, rather than to the Resurrection, that the unknown writer appeals as the fundamental fact on which his whole argument rests.¹ He is, however, clear in his testimony to the earlier fact (xiii. 20), as well as to that of the death of Christ and its propitiatory effect (ix. 28, xii. 2, xiii. 12). And he refers to Baptism and the laying-on of hands as among the "first principles of Christ" (vi. 1, R. V.), while his views on the subject of Church discipline and the obligation of public worship are as strong as those of any of his predecessors (xiii. 7, 15-17). So if we admit, as of course we do, this epistle as an Apostolic utterance, we must include its writer among those who insist on these points as essential.

At the time at which we have now arrived—some forty years after the Day of Pentecost—a new generation of Christians

¹ Heb. i. 3; *cf.* ii. 9, 10, 14; x. 12; xii. 2.

had arisen who had not known our Lord in the flesh. It was natural that they should wish for some record of His earthly ministry. Such a record no doubt formed part of the regular teaching of those who had been His companions during those eventful years. But, as we have seen, it was not prominent in the early preaching of the Apostles, and it had not yet been committed to writing. At all events, it occupies a very small place in the Epistles of St. Paul, which then formed almost the whole extant Christian literature. There was much danger lest with the death of the Apostles those precious reminiscences of the Divine Founder of Christianity should be lost. To avoid this the Synoptic Gospels were written. The date of their publication is uncertain. Some scholars have assigned them to an earlier period—that covered by our last paper. But it is not likely that, if they had been published during the lifetime of St. Paul, he would have made no allusion to them in any of his letters. It is quite possible that one or more written Gospels were in existence before those which we now possess. But in their present form they were probably written during the twenty years which followed the destruction of Jerusalem.

It must be remembered that these Gospels were not doctrinal treatises, and do not profess to be complete biographies. But incidentally they confirm the testimony of St. Paul both as to the fundamental facts and as to the doctrines which he declared to be essential to the Christian faith. They are explicit as to the truth of the Resurrection, and the reality of our Lord's glorified Body, and as to His Ascension. And one great fact they mention as to which St. Paul is silent—the miraculous birth of Christ without a human father. This may have been asserted as a corrective of the Ebionite heresy, to which reference has been made. At all events, it is stated in unmistakable terms both by the first and third evangelists. There is not the slightest ground for supposing that these passages in St. Matthew's and St. Luke's Gospels are interpolations, and there is no possibility of mistaking their meaning. The authority for the Virgin Birth is exactly the same as that for the Sermon on

the Mount or the Lord's Prayer. The statement must be derived from the only person who could have known whether it was true, and who had not the slightest reason for inventing a story which was in itself improbable, and which, if untrue, amounted to a serious imputation on herself. If the statement is not correct, the documents which relate it are utterly untrustworthy, and the whole account of our Lord's earthly life must be relegated to the region of romance. Unless, therefore, we are prepared to exclude these two Gospels from our list of authorities, we must regard the Virgin Birth as one of the facts whose acceptance is essential to Christianity.

Nor are the Synoptists silent as to the doctrines on which St. Paul insists. They clearly proclaim the Divinity of Christ,¹ and in one notable passage St. Matthew and St. Luke record His own claim to Divine honour in terms as explicit as any used by St. John.² And the frequency with which the title "Son of God" is contemptuously applied to Him by His enemies shows that they must have been perfectly familiar with His claim to be God.³ The doctrine of the Atonement is clearly set forth in several passages, of which Matt. xx. 28 is the most explicit, where the words *λύτρον ἀντὶ πολλῶν* refer to vicarious suffering with a directness hardly equalled in the writings of St. Paul. The doctrine of the Trinity is implied in the numerous passages which assert the Divinity of the Holy Ghost, and is explicitly contained in the words in which our Lord instituted the Sacrament of Holy Baptism (Matt. xxviii. 19). It is important to remember these passages, because they afford a complete answer to the statement sometimes made by the new critics that these doctrines were no part of the original "Gospel" as Christ gave it, and were added afterwards by St. Paul and St. John.

¹ See especially Matt. xiv. 33; Mark xiv. 62; Luke i. 35, etc.

² Matt. xi. 27; Luke x. 22.

³ Matt. iv. 3, viii. 39, xxvi. 63; Mark xv. 39.

III.

The publication of this new Christian literature tended rather to excite than to allay controversy within the Church. For though we can find much doctrine in the Synoptic Gospels, there is no doubt that their aspect to those who read them for the first time is that of memoirs rather than of doctrinal treatises. They put forward the human side of our Lord's work, and exhibit, as no other religious writings have done, the majesty of His earthly ministry. So we can quite imagine that the Ebionites would appeal to them in favour of their views as against those of their great opponent, St. Paul. Did these records support the doctrine which he had formulated as to our Lord's Divine nature? Was there anything in the Master's own language to justify such teaching, or to suggest that He claimed for Himself such a Divinity as St. Paul ascribed to Him? Such questions were no doubt common in Christian circles between A.D. 80 and A.D. 90. Most of those who could give an authoritative answer to them had passed away. But there was still living at Ephesus, in extreme old age, the last survivor of the Twelve—one who had been on terms of such special intimacy with the Master that he was known as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." He had been with Him on the Mount of Transfiguration and in the Garden of Gethsemane. He was the last of the Apostles to leave the Cross, and the first to look into the empty grave. After the Ascension he appears as the colleague of St. Peter in the Pentecostal Church, but after that the notices of him in the New Testament are very few. He was at one time on the island of Patmos, where he wrote the Book of Revelation. He was, on his own showing, there as a prisoner for conscience' sake (Rev. i. 9). It used to be thought that this exile was imposed by Domitian, but it seems more likely to have been an incident in the Neronian persecution. If so, the Apocalypse is one of the earliest books of our period, and, in any case, its meaning is so uncertain that it is of little use for our immediate purpose. The latter part of the Apostle's life was spent at Ephesus, where

he lived until after the accession of Trajan¹ (A.D. 98). It was certainly during these closing years of his life that he wrote the Gospel and Epistle with which we are now concerned. These Johannine writings are almost our only authority as to Apostolic teaching after the publication of the Synoptic Gospels, two of which are only Apostolic at second hand. If St. John's writings are not genuine, we may as well close our inquiry at this point. And it would be affectation to ignore the fact that their genuineness is keenly disputed by eminent scholars, who admit that of the Synoptic Gospels and of most of St. Paul's Epistles.

The limits of space and of our subject preclude me from entering on any detailed discussion of this question. For a full vindication of the genuineness of these writings I must refer my readers to the learned articles by Dr. Strong and Dr. Reynolds in Hastings' "Dictionary of the Bible," and by Archdeacon Watkins in Smith's Bible Dictionary. Those who want to see what critics can say on the other side will find it in Dr. Schmiedel's article in the "Encyclopædia Biblica," and will probably derive from its perusal an impression the exact opposite of that which the writer intended to convey. But I cannot refrain from mentioning two remarkable books which have appeared since these articles were written. One is Dr. Drummond's learned work on "The Character and Authorship of the Fourth Gospel"; the other is the Abbé Loisy's "Le Quatrième Évangile." The significance of the former lies in the fact that its writer is convinced, on critical grounds, that St. John wrote the Gospel, though he does not accept either its history or its doctrine. The French critic, on the other hand, considers the Johannine authorship as seriously questionable, the history as more than doubtful, while he regards the book as a doctrinal work of the greatest value and importance. His language, in another book, is so remarkable, considering the quarter from which it comes, that I quote it at some length :

Le quatrième Évangile est surtout un livre de foi. La foi de l'Église qui l'avait inspiré, s'y est reconnue. Je ne le considère nullement comme une

¹ Euseb., H. E., iii. 23, 31.

altération, mais comme une interprétation de l'histoire. *C'est le perle du Nouveau Testament.*¹ *L'auteur ne nous a pas trompés en nous le donnant comme une œuvre de l'Esprit.* Il est bien dans l'esprit de Jesus. J'oserai dire seulement qu'il représente l'esprit en transfigurant le corps. Il complète admirablement les Synoptiques, et *il contribue peut-être autant qu'eux mais autrement, à faire connaître le Christ.* Je prends dans les Synoptiques l'histoire de Jésus, et chez Jean l'idée de sa mission universelle, de son action permanente, de sa vie dans l'Église immortelle. J'emploie les trois premiers Évangiles pour raconter le Sauveur, et le quatrième pour l'expliquer.²

In these words the Abbé exactly describes the purpose of St. John's Gospel. This was not to add a supplementary memoir to those already in circulation, giving details which they had omitted—it was to refute the current heresies by a statement of the true doctrine concerning the Person of Christ. It shows Him to have been from all eternity God — on an equality with the Father, but not the same Person. Only such acts and words of His as exhibit Him in this character are recorded by the Evangelist. St. John does not add any new doctrine to those propounded by St. Paul. He states the same in more precise language and from a somewhat different point of view. The latter Apostle looks on the Incarnation of Christ as His work for us, and so dwells on the union which it establishes between Him and us. The Evangelist regards it as the manifestation of His Godhead, and therefore lays more stress on the union between Him and God the Father. What St. John does add is his testimony to the fact that our Lord declared Himself to be God, and that therefore we cannot reject His Divinity without accusing Him of profane assumption. This is most important as a corrective to the modern tendency to separate our Lord's *moral* from His *dogmatic* teaching, and to treat the former as having higher sanction than the latter. This is quite impossible if St. John's report of His discourses is even approximately accurate.

The other great contribution which St. John makes to Christian theology is his very clear statement of the doctrine of

¹ The italics are mine throughout. It is mainly for these sentences that the passage is quoted.

² "Autour d'un Petit Livre," pp. 107, 108.

the Trinity. This great truth was indeed implied in various passages in St. Paul's writings, and, as we have seen, was laid down by our Lord Himself in the formula of Baptism. But it is by St. John that it is stated in its most precise terms. It is true that the verse in his first Epistle (1 John v. 7), in which it is expressed in the language of later theology, is now known to be spurious. But the unity of the Godhead and the Divinity of each of the three Persons is clearly stated in the great discourse recorded in the 14th, 15th, and 16th chapters of the Gospel, and underlies the Apostle's whole argument in many passages both in the Gospel and the Epistle.

St. John corroborates the statements of the earlier Apostolic age as to the fundamental facts. It is in his Gospel that we have the most convincing evidence of our Lord's death, and of the reality of His risen Body.¹ It is likely that the Apostle drew special attention to these in view of the erroneous teaching of the Docetæ. But his statements are equally valuable as a refutation of different, but not less dangerous, errors current in our own day. And he is as emphatic as St. Paul in his assertion of the propitiatory character of Christ's Death.² His silence on the Sacraments and some other points is to be accounted for by his limitation of the scope of his work. On the whole we can confidently claim St. John as holding the same things to be essential as his predecessors had done, and as expressing them in language calculated to meet the needs of the generation for which he wrote.

With his death the Apostolic age comes to its close. Our survey of it has shown us that its principles as to fact, doctrine, worship, and discipline were consistent, definite, and progressive. The Apostles leave to us a body of teaching almost identical with that of the Creed which bears their name. This we may fairly say is the essence of the Christian faith. If there is such a thing as "fundamental Christianity," this is it. We need not ask for more than the Apostles left us, but we must not be content with less. In this and the two preceding papers we

¹ John xix. 33, 34, xx. 27.

² John i. 29, iii. 17 ; 1 John ii. 2, iv. 10.

have traced the growth of Apostolic Christianity in its successive stages. In the next we shall have to consider it as a whole, and to see what it admits and what it excludes in that medley of vague and various opinions which is called the Christianity of to-day.



Conversion and Modern Thought.

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THE summary dismissal of old and tried beliefs, still firmly held by many leaders of thought, as "obsolete dogmas," is one of those minor irritants with which students of recent thought must bear with as best they may. But those who adopt this attitude hastily and thoughtlessly against their brethren in the faith have less cause to complain against such treatment from without. To just such supercilious evasion has the doctrine of "conversion" been peculiarly subjected.

And yet surely it is, and has been, an immense spiritual dynamic. By virtue both of its attractive power and of its widespread fruitfulness it has a *primâ facie* case. And it is only in accordance with the spirit of modern thought at its soundest and best that the doctrine and phenomenon of conversion should receive a sympathetic and reverent consideration. Has it received such a consideration? To a great extent it has. So much so, indeed, that the glib contempt of persons who know just enough of modern thought to be unsettled may be said to have received a rebuke. Psychologists like Professors Starbuck and James, writing simply as such, have at least vindicated the right of the evangelist to respectful attention.

Certainly we cannot rest satisfied—nor do they ask us to rest satisfied—with an explanation of conversion by reference to brain processes, and to its affinity with religious experience outside the Christian pale. But to those who fear that this line of treatment explains away its supernatural character, I would say