

The Witness of Pentecost to the Claims of Christ.

II.

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ATTENTION was drawn last month to the belief of the early Church, as embodied in the original documents of Christianity, that our Lord, in the fulness of the Messianic consciousness, predicted the coming of the Holy Spirit. We now turn to the fulfilment of that promise, namely, *the fact of Pentecost*. We need not, for the moment, or for our immediate purpose, insist upon the physical signs—the rushing mighty wind and tongues of fire—that accompanied the event. We simply take our stand upon the fact that there was at that particular time, in immediate connexion with Christ's death and resurrection, an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which corresponded with the promise given by our Lord.

For convincing proof of the Holy Spirit's special presence and guidance in the first days of Christianity we need go no further than the New Testament itself. We contrast St. Peter of the Gospels with St. Peter of the Acts, Saul of Tarsus with Paul the Apostle, and almost instinctively we say: "What hath God wrought?" As with the agents so with their writings. The superiority of tone and spirit in the New Testament is so extraordinary that naturalism is absolutely powerless to account for it. This transcendent excellence not only makes itself felt when we pass from the writings of the New Testament to the best productions of pagan philosophy, but also when we place those writings beside the rabbinical and apocalyptic literature of the period. And the phenomenon becomes the more striking when we compare the Canonical Gospels of the first century with the apocryphal productions of later date, or the letters of St. Paul with those written in the following generation by the Apostolic Fathers. Why is the superiority of the New Testament so unmistakable, so vast? By far the easiest and most reasonable explanation of this, as well as of the disciples' eager-

ness and enthusiasm in the work of evangelization, is to be found in the belief of the Church that the Pentecostal Gift was no invention or illusion, but a stupendous fact—a fact only to be co-ordinated with the Nativity itself.

In perfect harmony with this phenomenon we find the whole course of history so powerfully affected by Christianity that it is a common thing to describe the Church as revolutionizing the world. It is beyond dispute that, at the beginning of the Christian era, new spiritual possibilities were opened to mankind, new moral qualities, new virtues came into existence, a new individuality appeared upon the stage of history, new ideals presented and commended themselves, new views of God, and of the relation of the seen to the unseen, were introduced and spread with extraordinary rapidity. "Christianity," says Dean Church, "is very far from having accomplished everything that might have been hoped for, but history teaches us this : that, in tracing back the course of human improvement, we come, in one case after another, upon Christianity as the source from which improvement derived its principle and its motive ; we find no other source adequate to account for the new spring of amendment, and without it no other sources of good could have been relied upon."¹

It was this historical retrospect more, perhaps, than any other argument, which broke down the agnosticism of George Romanes, and ranged him among Christian apologists. "The revolution effected by Christianity in human life is immeasurable and unparalleled by any other movement in history. . . . Not only is Christianity thus so immeasurably in advance of all other religions. It is no less so of every other system of thought that has ever been promulgated in regard to all that is moral and spiritual. The most remarkable thing about Christianity is its adaptation to all sorts and conditions of men."²

We have no need, however, to appeal on this head to the representatives of orthodoxy. The fact of Pentecost is fully

¹ "Gifts of Civilization," p. 293. Compare pp. 97, 163.

² "Thoughts on Religion," p. 159.

recognized by historians who cannot be suspected of any bias in the direction of traditional beliefs. "The great characteristic of Christianity," says Mr. Lecky, "and the great moral proof of its divinity is that it has been the main source of the moral development of Europe. . . . There is, indeed, nothing more wonderful in the history of the human race than the way in which that ideal has traversed the lapse of ages, acquiring a new strength and beauty with each advance of civilization, and infusing its beneficent influence into every sphere of thought and action."¹ The following words are from the pen of Dr. Percy Gardner: "As regards the founding of the Christian faith, the course of history can only be accounted for by the supposition of a Divine inspiration of the Founder and His disciples, an inspiration which has lasted down to our time."² And a little further on: "It (*i.e.*, the first years of the Christian era) was, indeed, a marvellous age, a time of inspiration, of the mixture of the human and Divine into a draught which should restore to health a sickening world."³ Or, shall we listen to Professor Harnack's estimate of Christ's work? "Christian character," he writes, "is to show itself in the essential circumstances of human life, and that life is to be invigorated, supported, and illumined by the Spirit. In the relation of husband to wife, or wife to husband, of parents to children, of masters to servants; further, in the individual's relation to constituted authority, to the surrounding heathen world, and again to the widow and orphan, is the 'service of God' to be tested. Where have we another example in history of a religion intervening with such a robust, supernatural consciousness, and at the same time laying the moral foundations of the earthly life of the community so firmly as this message?"⁴ Even deep-rooted prejudice cannot blind the eye of the historian to facts. Gibbon may treat Christianity and its spread with half-disguised contempt, and with an unfairness which has almost passed into a proverb, but we can turn to his pages for

¹ "Rise and Influence of Rationalism," i., p. 307.

² "Exploratio Evangelica," p. 142.

⁴ "What is Christianity?" p. 171.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

an account of the revolution wrought by the Christian faith: "While that great body (*i.e.*, the Roman Empire) was invaded by open violence or undermined by slow decay, a pure and humble religion gently insinuated itself into the minds of men, grew up in silence and obscurity, derived new vigour from opposition, and finally erected the triumphant banner of the Cross on the ruins of the Capitol."¹

The ethical and spiritual change brought about in the history of the world by Christ is a fact that cannot be gainsaid. With the advent of Christianity a new epoch of evolution opened for the world.² In theory and practice alike the Church took her stand upon the principle that spiritual and eternal interests are superior to those of a temporal nature, thus establishing, on moral grounds, the law of present sacrifice for future efficiency—a law inseparable from evolutionary development. Writing from a definitely Christian standpoint, Dean Church puts this truth with his usual force and clearness: "To have fought against and triumphed over the tendency to put or drop out of sight the supreme value of the spiritual part of man, to cloud the thought of God in relation to life, to obscure the proportion between what *is* and what we look forward to, is the great achievement of Christianity. We can hardly have the measure to estimate the greatness of it."³

We make no apology for introducing these quotations, because it is supremely important that we should carry in our minds the impression that has been made upon the world of thought, whether orthodox or the reverse, whether liberal or conservative, by the work of Christ and His Apostles. Every writer from whom we have cited is a witness in his own way, and from his own point of view, to the Pentecostal Gift. We may add that the very fact of the modern world dating its own

¹ "History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire," ii., p. 110.

² See B. Kidd, "Principles of Western Civilization," p. 196 *et seq.* Mr. Kidd points out that the preparation for the world-wide movement of Christianity is to be found in the literature and history of the Hebrew nation (p. 201).

³ "Gifts of Civilization," p. 108.

birth from the birth of our Lord is, of itself, an unanswerable witness to the greatness of that Gift.

That there was preparation of many kinds for the changes effected by the coming of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit no one doubts. Such is always the way of God. It was so with the comparatively pure and exalted worship of the Hebrew nation. Modern inquiry has detected analogies between the religious beliefs and practices of the Jew and those of the surrounding peoples. The worship of the Jew had its root in a cult which had been many ages in existence, and had prepared the way for God's revelation of Himself to His ancient people. So, too, the Christian religion found the soil prepared for it, not only by the intellect and language of Greece and the unifying energy of Rome, but also by many features of that very paganism which it was destined so rapidly to supplant. Long before the days of the Empire the religions of the East had found their way to the West, and were familiarizing the mind of the nations with religious conceptions, which only found their true expression in Christianity.¹ It is a mistake to suppose that the Church of Christ was launched into an irreligious world; ignorant, superstitious, if you like—but not godless, impious, secularistic. This has not been sufficiently recognized by some of our historians. Mr. Lecky, for example, while amply justified in saying that "superstition was rampant," goes beyond the truth in stating that "by the time the Empire was established at Rome religion was practically dead."² It is not, indeed, without profound

¹ "Isis and Serapis, along with Mithra, were preparing the Western world for the religion which was to appease the long travail of humanity by a more perfect vision of the Divine."—Professor Dill, "Roman Society from Nero to M. Aurelius," p. 574. Mithraism embodied the doctrines of mediation and resurrection. It had its baptism and confirmation for new disciples, its "holy feasts of consecrated bread and wine, where the mystic draught gave purity of life to soul and body, and was the passport to a life in God." The religion of Mithra also stimulated and fed, more than any other pagan system, the instinct of immortality. Without question, the affinities between Mithraism and Christianity were very striking; but Professor Dill most truly remarks: "One great weakness of Mithraism lay precisely here—that, in place of the narrative of a Divine life, instinct with human sympathy, it had only to offer the cold symbolism of a cosmic legend" (*ibid.*, p. 622).

² "History of European Morals," i., p. 169. It is quite true that the hold of the ancient Roman faith was weakened, but new cults were spreading, and were enthusiastically welcomed.

significance that the most hideous excesses of vice recorded by the historian were actually taking place in the palaces and mansions of Rome at the very time when Christ was laying the foundations of His kingdom in Palestine and St. Paul was preaching that kingdom amongst the Gentiles; but we are apt to dwell too exclusively upon the coarse materialism of the plutocracy and the degradation of the proletariat in the great centres of population,¹ and we forget the comparative purity of provincial and rural life, with its sincere attachment to the various cults which divided between them the allegiance of the Roman world. Nothing that the research of the historian and the spade of the archæologist have brought to light during the last quarter of a century is more remarkable than the amount of testimony brought together to the genuine religiousness of the world at the beginning of the Christian era.

All this means for the Christian historian that God had been at work in the world, that the heathen had not been left without witness, and that the field of the world in which the seed of the kingdom was to be sown was a field of prepared soil. "The world was in the throes of a religious revolution, and eagerly in quest of some fresh vision of the Divine, from whatever quarter it might dawn."² There were hopes and cravings and ideals in the heart of man, apart from special revelation, that could only be satisfied and realized through something better than it possessed—thoughts of God and immortality and the unseen, which were waiting time and opportunity for fuller, clearer expression. The opportunity was given when men went everywhere preaching the good tidings of the Kingdom.

Under Divine direction, then, the world was working its way towards the truth. All this preparation, however, did not

¹ Even in Rome, throughout the first century of the Christian era, there were men such as Seneca, Thræsea, the elder and younger Pliny, Quintilian, Tacitus, who worthily represented the cause of philosophy and nobly maintained the best traditions of ancient Rome. And such examples might be matched by not a few of the daughters of Rome. For an account of the opposing forces of Roman society in that period see Dill, "Roman Society from Nero to M. Aurelius," pp. 1-195.

² Dill, "Roman Society from Nero to M. Aurelius," p. 82.

dispense with the need either of a spiritual momentum for the inception, or of an attendant spiritual energy for the progress, of the kingdom of Christ. Our Lord would not have been "the well-spring of a new humanity" without Pentecost. If we believe that the Jew could never have attained to his unquestioned superiority in the sphere of religion in the ancient world without Divine impulse and guidance, still more sure are we that the far higher Christian conception of God and morality would not have become the possession of mankind except through the vitalizing and enabling power of the Spirit. That the world, apart from revelation, was conscious of moral failure cannot be denied. The literature of the period in question is a literature of confession: pessimism reigns almost supreme: poet, philosopher, historian, vie with one another in exposing the follies and vices of human nature. But without the enlightening and energizing power of the Spirit there would have been no cure for that hopeless moral paralysis, to which a licentious poet of the Augustan age gave expression in the familiar words: "*Vide meliora proboque, deteriora sequor.*"¹ Without a driving, impelling, power the example of Jesus Christ and the teaching of the Apostles would never have revolutionized the world; there must be a Pentecost of the Spirit as well as a life of Christ. "The historical fact of Christ," it has been truly said, "interpreted by faith, is the central secret of the New Testa-

¹ After describing the horrors of the gladiatorial shows and the devotion of all classes to them, Mr. Lecky continues: "It is well for us to look steadily on such facts as these. They display more vividly than any mere philosophical disquisition the abyss of depravity into which it is possible for human nature to sink. They furnish us with striking proofs of the reality of the moral progress we have attained, and they enable us in some degree to estimate the regenerating influence that Christianity has exercised upon the world. For the destruction of the gladiatorial games is all its work. Philosophers, indeed, might deplore them, gentle natures might shrink from their contagion, but to the multitude they possessed a fascination which nothing but the new religion could overcome."—"*History of European Morals,*" i., p. 282. It was rarely that even the best of the Romans evinced any compunction at these carnivals of cruelty. The younger Pliny, who was the model Roman gentleman and represented the highest moral tone of his age, though he had no personal liking for such spectacles, commended his friend Maximus for giving a gladiatorial show in honour of his deceased wife.—See Dill, "*Roman Society from Nero to M. Aurelius,*" p. 236.

ment. It is to the Apostles a great new Act of God, which constitutes a new world."¹ But how was this "central secret" to be imparted? How was it to be made effective and fruitful? What answer is there to this question, but the one that St. John gives as coming from the lips of Jesus Christ? "He, the Holy Spirit, shall take of Mine and declare it unto you;"—a truth which St. Paul fully recognizes when he writes to the Corinthians: "No man can say that Jesus is Lord, but in the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. xii. 3). It was with the name of Jesus Christ upon their lips, and in the power of the Holy Ghost, that Apostles went forth to their work; and in less than a century their Master's kingdom was established in every part of the known world.

Let us, in conclusion, bring together and try to correlate the various points to which our thoughts have been directed. We have seen that the promise of Pentecost is not only a part of the primitive tradition of Christianity, but also the almost inevitable outcome of our Lord's Messianic consciousness; and we have seen this promise undeniably fulfilled in the history of the Church and the world. What are we to infer? Many were the pretenders to the Messiahship; one after another they arose, and the baselessness of their pretensions was shown by the failure of their work. When Gamaliel said: "If this counsel or work be of men it will come to naught, but if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it" (Acts v. 38, 39), he not only pronounced sentence upon Theudas and Judas, and every false Messiah that followed them, but set the seal of approval, though all unconsciously, upon the work of Jesus of Nazareth. In what startling contrast does the claim of Jesus stand to that of every other aspirant to the Messianic office! Here, extending over centuries, are the writings of the prophets, ever pointing onward to a golden age of Messianic consummation and spiritual development. In the Gospels we see One who stands for all that is purest, highest, saintliest, wisest, in human experience—One of whom a German rationalist can write: "Every conceivable ten-

¹ Cairns, "Self-assertion of Jesus," *Contemporary Review*, October, 1904, p. 537.

dency of thought struggles for the possession of Jesus Christ,"¹—One, moreover, untouched by earthly ambitions and selfish motives—we see this One proclaiming Himself the Personalization of these Messianic visions, and confidently predicting an effusion of the Spirit of God that should make the world His harvest-field. Lastly, we see this expectation and promise fulfilled in the gift of Pentecost and the new creation of the world that followed. Rationalism completely fails to explain away this triple witness to the transcendental Personality of Jesus Christ. These three facts of history, the Voice of Prophecy, the Messianic Consciousness, the Baptism of the Spirit, form a threefold cord not easily broken ; rather, we may say, they form links in a chain of argument which, pursued to its legitimate conclusion, assures us that, in accepting the creed of Christendom, we are not the victims of illusion.



India's Special Claims.

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THE Bishop of London calls the sense of responsibility "the strongest thing in the world"; and so it is. Responsibility for the right use of gifts and privileges we possess is one of the most distinctive moral lessons which the Bible would impress upon us. Without the sense of responsibility no nation, no individual can have any character and continue firm.

"Go ye and make disciples of all the nations" is a command to be simply and unquestioningly obeyed. And our obligation is in proportion to our privileges and opportunities. It is a confessed and general law pervading every department of creation, that special privileges imply responsibilities. This is frequently insisted on in connexion with the Jewish Church and with the people of Israel, who, for reasons to us inscrutable,

¹ Harnack, "What is Christianity?" p. 3.