

The Spiritual Aspect of the Great War.¹

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“Prove the spirits; . . . every spirit which confesseth not Jesus is not of God.”—I JOHN IV. I, 3 (R.V.).

THERE is a real danger lest, while our minds are concentrated on the great events which are passing before us, the deep, abiding spiritual forces, not only of life generally, but which lie behind this present war, be forgotten. There probably never was a time when the physical and the material was so apt to absorb our attention. We are thinking of the material weapons of warfare, of its material and physical results, of wounds and death, of material destruction of priceless monuments of the past, of want of work, and of poverty in many shapes and forms. It almost seems as if we had neither time nor energy to think of anything beyond these.

If you or I were physically attacked, say by a highwayman or a burglar, we should surely concentrate all our thought and all our energy upon how we could best defend ourselves. This is the present condition of our nation, and explains the state of mind of every true Englishman to-day.

Yet there never was a time when it was more necessary to remember that man is a *spiritual* being, ruled by spiritual forces and having spiritual needs. And—I record it with thankfulness—never have I seen a more widespread expression of the consciousness of the need of spiritual help.

If the spiritual includes thought and feeling—and if “spiritual” is opposed to “material” it must include these—then the ultimate causes of this war are spiritual, however material may be its weapons.

The match which set the explosive material alight was the murder of the Austrian heir-apparent, the cause of which was a misguided and fanatical patriotism—a spiritual feeling. This

¹ A sermon preached in St. Albans Cathedral on Sunday, September 6, 1914.

murder was the excuse for the revenge, or rather for the ambition, of Austria, which in turn provoked the race-championship of Russia, which, again, became the occasion for the pouring forth of the long-pent-up hatred, covetousness, and boundless ambition, of Germany, which last was answered by the heroic defence of her independence by Belgium, and by the determination on the part of England to prevent injustice and oppression. Every one of these various steps or movements was due to some deep-rooted feeling, to some thought within the minds of these various nations, hence ultimately to some spiritual force or power. Thus we can see that, however grossly material the *objects* of Germany and Austria may have been, the ultimate cause of each movement on the part of each nation was really spiritual, each was the outcome of some "spirit." And as we examine these various spirits, we can see how some of them lead inevitably to misery, destruction, and death, while others lead as surely to the protection, the development, the purification, and the ennobling, of life.

Christianity is essentially a spiritual religion, one dealing with spirits, seeking to foster and strengthen some spirits, while endeavouring to root out and destroy others. Spirits are forces; they are the motive powers of action and conduct. Christ's wisdom is seen in His constant reference to these, in His method of always piercing, beneath the outward and visible phenomena of life, to the inward, the "spiritual" causes which lie beneath, and which are constantly producing, these.

The text bids us to "prove the spirits"—in other words, to examine and test the nature of those motive powers of conduct by which we and others are guided and ruled. It further supplies us with one all-sufficient, absolute test of the rightness or the wrongness of every spirit. Does this spirit practically confess the infinite supremacy—in other words, the Divinity—of Jesus? Does it own Him as Lord and Master? Is it in perfect unison with His Spirit? Does it tend to promote conduct and actions such as His? This is the one and only standard by which the nature and quality of all spirits must be proved.

Undoubtedly for many years a great wave of irreligion has been passing over Europe. It has been terribly pronounced in Germany; it has been more than sufficiently apparent in England. If we have maintained something of the outward form of religion, have we not been far too careless of its inner essence? Treitschke's verdict, that "with the English people love of money has killed every sentiment of honour and every distinction between right and wrong, though they hid their materialism under the unctuous phrases of religion," is doubtless far too sweeping; but none of us can assert that it is absolutely untrue.

But some may be saying of me, "When you speak of irreligion, should you not rather address yourself to the multitudes who hardly ever enter a place of worship?" Did Amos, or Isaiah, did our Lord Himself address His rebukes either exclusively or chiefly to these? What did Amos say about coming to Bethel and transgressing, and at Gilgal multiplying transgression? What did Isaiah say to those who "trampled" God's courts, and to those who bowed down their heads as the bulrushes? To whom were Christ's most scathing invectives addressed, but to the Scribes and the Pharisees, the professedly religious among the people?

Spirit is the motive power of conduct, and conduct reveals spirit. What, I ask, has been the real, the actual motive lying behind many of our religious observances? Has there been a really earnest, an enthusiastic, desire to study God's Word, as the revelation not only of the highest, but of the all-important, Truth? What self-sacrifice have we evinced in order to obtain or to impart this priceless knowledge, this absolutely essential guide to conduct? Where have been the prayers so really earnest, that they produced sweat upon our brows as upon the brow of the Master? Where have been the Communion which felt the actual spiritual presence of Christ: not "under the forms of bread and wine," but as feeling His entire spiritual nature passing into our nature, the assimilation of His whole personality—human and Divine?

Conduct reveals spirit. What earnest, persistent, self-sacrificing effort has there been to redress social wrong? Have we not been far too careless about this? And even to-day, in the midst of a spiritual awakening, while we give to relief funds with one hand, do we raise the other to prevent the simply appalling waste of both money and character which is taking place every night in the public-houses of our great cities, and not least in the wicked and idiotic "treating" of various kinds of troops, who are either quartered among us or are leaving for the war?

Try the spirits, prove the spirits, the motive powers by which conduct is actually governed. Probably never in the world's history were the actual results, the inevitable issues, of evil spirits, of wrong motives, of base and sordid passions, more clearly revealed than they are revealed to-day. They are only too plainly revealed in the desolated homes of Belgium, in the corpse-piled battle-fields of Servia, of Austria, and of France.

We cannot condemn too strongly the arrogance, the covetousness, the ambition, the desire to increase material possession, of which Germany has been guilty; and, remember, these spirits have not been fanned merely in the councils of her military leaders, but in the lecture-rooms of professors, by some of the keenest intellects among her teachers. But while we condemn them, let us ask whether in our own individual hearts and minds we have been entirely guiltless of harbouring the same spirits? Have we been as ready to give as we have been to get? Have we been as ready to serve as to see how we might exact service?

Oh, what a call to cultivate a *new* spirit! To get for us a new heart and a new mind! To seek for the spirit of love issuing in a life of self-sacrifice for others! To cultivate the spirit of Jesus, who ever went about releasing from sin and diffusing happiness, setting men and women free from the worst of all slaveries—the slavery to the Devil, the source of all the evil spirits in the world!

"Renew a right spirit within me" must be the constant prayer of every true follower of Christ to-day. And with prayer

must go Christlike effort, Christlike personal self-sacrifice. There must be a real self-sacrifice for our country, for our country's cause, which, thank God, in this great war is the cause of truth and righteousness, of justice and of mercy.



Studies in Texts:

SUGGESTIONS FOR SERMONS FROM CURRENT LITERATURE.

BY THE REV. HARRINGTON C. LEES, M.A.

IX.—THE PERMANENT VALUE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT.

Text:—"Every scribe who hath been made a disciple is like unto a householder which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old."—St. Matt. xiii. 52.

[Book of the Month: "THE ANATOMY OF TRUTH"¹=AT. Other references: Kellogg's "Leviticus" (Expos. Bible)=KL. Bonar's "Leviticus"=BL. Plummer's "St. Matthew"=PM. Bruce's "St. Matthew" (Expos. G.T.)=B.M. Smith's "Days of His Flesh"=DF. Mackinlay's "Magi"=M. Ramsay's "Luke the Physician"=R.]

THIS small parable is the fixing of a principle arising from the disciples' assertion that they understood the previous seven, which contain the family secrets ("mysteries") of the Kingdom. Capron thinks allusion to Lev. xxvi. 9, 10; and parable illustrating the link between Old and New Covenants. We have then—

I. A NEW TESTAMENT PARABLE.—The scribe (*i.e.*, teacher of old Law) has become a disciple (learner of new Law). What is he to do with the old? Like a man with ever-replenished storehouse, he is to use both old stock and new, not throw away the old (AT. 212, 213). "Produce things new and old in new form" (PM. 198).

¹ "Anatomy of Truth," by F. Hugh Capron. Published by Hodder and Stoughton. A companion to the author's "Conflict of Truth," of which the late George Matheson said he was "enthralled, enchained, spellbound, by the magnificence of the reasoning and the striking freshness of treatment."