

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

CHELTENHAM CONFERENCE.

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS.

BY CANON H. A. WILSON, M.A., Rector and Rural Dean of Cheltenham, Hon. Chaplain to the Bishop of Gloucester.

WE have undertaken this year to consider a very far-reaching subject: The Church and the Future. It is the mission of the Church to meet the needs of each generation, and it is surely for very good reasons indeed that we feel that to meet the needs of the immediate future will throw a strain heavier than ever before upon the Church.

To-day is an age of transition. No doubt it has always been the case that every present contains within itself an element of flux, but in most ages change has been very gradual and the process of adaptation to new conditions could safely operate in a leisurely fashion. It is not so to-day. Rapid change is the order of our age, punctuated by occasional social earthquakes and religious volcanic eruptions. The old fixed points are being rubbed out, axioms which have done duty for generations are being challenged, and in every realm of human life the oft-quoted words of General Smuts are true: "Humanity has struck its tents and is again on the march."

Whither? And can the Church direct the great trek and minister to the pioneers?

It is my privilege and responsibility to make some sort of introductory statement. It is clear that this cannot be more than very partial and superficial; nevertheless, it may be of use in pointing the way to a useful discussion. And to this end we must endeavour to appreciate the symptoms in life and thought to-day if we would arrive at a correct diagnosis.

1. If we use the word "religious" in a very wide sense, I think it is true to say that to-day is a very religious era. The religious instinct is peculiarly alert and widespread. I do not say, and I certainly do not think, that orthodox Christianity is strong, but rather that there is a vague, widely-diffused religiousness which manifests itself in many ways. For instance, all forms of religion are treated with respect or at least criticized with restraint. Newspapers discuss religious topics freely and their leaders are constantly shot through with a distinct gleam of religion. Kindliness, toleration, sympathy, largeness of heart, generosity are very common virtues, so much so that superficial observers often say that Christianity is widespread in the world to-day. Gay and pleasure-loving people, at the call of duty or in answer to a moving appeal, are capable of making a wonderful response, as self-sacrificing as it is competent. The public ear is open to religion of any sort and is profoundly interested in it. All this, and a great deal more which could be said on the same line, suggests that the future will not be

a merely secular or non-religious age. I do not say it will be an age of faith or a Christian age.

2. Further, I think it is plain that there is a very clear idea in the popular mind that religion is a thing which has very wide implications. It is not a mere private matter between a man and the God he worships. If it is a real thing it will show itself in service, particularly of a social kind. A religion which is other-worldly in the sense that it does not consider civic duties, industrial problems and public service its concern is regarded as a thing of no practical value. Movements like Toc H, the Crusaders, and societies like the Industrial Christian Fellowship and the Copec Groups are concrete illustrations of a feeling which is widespread. The social conscience is alert and very sensitive, and I think it is highly probable that the religion of the future will be marked by a very definite determination to achieve social and industrial reform. Whatever form Christianity may take, if it is to be in harmony with, and the interpreter of, the public conscience, I think it is quite certain that social improvements and the problems of capital and labour will have to occupy a front-rank position in its teaching and practice.

3. Again, the religious feelings of to-day are but slightly concerned with sectarian differences except to regard them with uncontrolled impatience. It may be that this is not altogether a healthy indication. Slovenly and ignorant thinking may evoke a clamour for a unity between entirely contradictory things, and such an appeal must be disregarded. But a great deal of the force behind the popular bewilderment at the disunion of the Christian Church is perfectly healthy. The following of Christ should be a unifying force, and the widespread impatience with our disunion is a call to the Church which should not be disregarded. It is based upon a very clear realization that the Christian Church will not be equal to the task which belongs to it so long as our unhappy divisions are still acute. Questions like "valid ordinations" and "valid sacraments" do not excite much interest in the popular mind, and the apathy towards these things, which are the real obstacles to re-union, is indicative of a very real, instinctive appreciation of what religion is. The laboured and dignified conferences which issue in cautious and ambiguous pronouncements are, in the popular mind, very like fiddling while Rome burns.

4. This leads me on to what is perhaps the most critical symptom, at any rate, from the point of view of the orthodox Christian. The popular indifference to theological controversy, which is not entirely an unhealthy symptom in the lay mind, is akin to, and possibly part of, something of a very serious kind. I refer to the questioning of the value of Christian institutions. Are such things as Sunday observance, Church-going, attendance at the Holy Communion, possibly even private prayer, really necessary? A typical representative of the vague religious idea so widespread to-day would frame his question like this: "I believe that I ought to be kind-hearted and understanding, sympathetic and helpful to the under-

dog, and that I should be a decent citizen and an upright and moral man. If you like, I will even say the kind of man that Jesus Christ would approve. But I don't see how your religious observances will help me. I can get on without these things; and indeed, to speak quite frankly, I see many people who use these things whose lives are not Christian, to my way of thinking, at all. I can live the right kind of life without the Church and its machinery." Now this is not an imaginary case nor a rare case. I am quite sure that every one of us who mixes at all with non-Churchgoers and has been favoured by them with frank conversation would have heard some such opinion very frequently.

What my typical upright man says raises an anxious question which we have to face in our Conference. Can the Christian ethic survive apart from the Christian Institution? Institutional religion is very definitely on its trial. No person who deserves serious attention to-day denies the existence of God or that one owes a duty to God and man, but multitudes of people are frankly saying that their beliefs and duties have no necessary connection with the use or non-use of Christian institutions or with the belief or disbelief in Christian creeds. Indeed, it has been suggested that an ethical Creed might well be drawn up to take the place of our theological Creeds on the ground that emphasis of the Christian rule of life is what matters and, by implication, that belief in a body of doctrine has no necessary or clear connection with conduct.

I should like to dwell upon this point for a moment or two, for I think it is a very pronounced and significant feature in religiously-minded people to-day. It is due to several causes. There is, first of all, the ruthless criticism to which the Christian religion has been subjected. Even in the Church itself the "taboo" has been removed from doctrines which were regarded as permanently insulated from all criticism. Bold and outspoken writers and preachers are challenging this, disputing that, and desiring to re-state everything. I do not think we should regard this with any distress. It is the outcome of honesty and an earnest desire after truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. No section of people are more prone to adopt this root-and-branch critical attitude than the young men and women of the student class. They will not be fobbed off with the old *clichés* "this is in the Bible"; "the Church has always taught that." Whether it is agreeable to us or not, the fact remains that no doctrine of the Christian religion can be regarded as staked off from criticism. Consequently, there is a tendency to react to all this process by falling back upon conduct. "If you live the Christian life, what you actually believe matters little," is the conclusion of the superficial or lazy mind.

Secondly, I think this attitude is a reaction to the over-institutionalism which is seen in certain quarters to-day. The tendency to systematize is seen in the history of every religion, and also in Christianity itself. It is not only inevitable, but it is necessary. But as we study the history of the Christian Church we notice how periods of "over-institutionalizing" alternate with reactions which

have been sometimes very unhealthy, times when there has been a temporary break away from important Christian ceremonies, and when people have claimed to rediscover the original truth of Christianity and have expressed it in some bizarre form. Sometimes the reaction has been very healthy, and has taken the form of an explosion which has cleared the air and ushered in an epoch distinguished by true and spiritual religion.

Some such reaction may occur in the near future. I think the young life in the Church and outside (but I speak with caution, for this is to be discussed by people very competent to guide us) is characterized by impatience. Young men and women of the student class have a perspective very different from our own, and our sedate and leisurely way of facing problems is an attitude which they rather scorn.

Something is going to happen. That is the vague but very real impression which one has of the future: things are not going on in the old orderly monotony. Religion of a sort is distinctly alive and vigorous to-day, but will it move in the direction of orthodox Christianity or in the direction of an ethical Christianity which is unconcerned with Christian doctrines and casual towards Christian practices?

It seems to me that the answer to this grave question depends upon the answer to another question: Is Christianity, as we conceive it, capable of adapting itself to new conditions? A backward-looking Christianity, hampered by outworn catchwords, will certainly be left in some tranquil pool while the main stream of life and thought flows on. But a backward-looking Christianity is a defective Christianity. It is only dead or dying things which are rigid. Our religion is a living thing, and a living thing possesses the power of adapting itself to, and even controlling, its environment.

Now the form of Christianity, which—in theory at any rate—is elastic and adaptable is Evangelicalism. It is worth while reminding ourselves of the truth of this statement. The history of Evangelicalism shows that daring, adventure and taking risks have been its constant characteristic. The Lollards, the Reformers, the Puritans, the Cromwellians, the Nonconformists, were all Evangelicals. Their religion could assert itself in most varied forms, and yet the heart of it was always the same. I do not want to criticize other expressions of Christianity in our Church, but at least this must be said of Anglo-Catholicism: it does not possess the power of adapting itself. It has solidified, and like every form of Catholicism, its ideals and its ends are already fixed and lie in the past. It has, as it were, its fixed mould into which it would force each age. In ages of docility its success is remarkable, but in an age like the future, which will certainly not be docile, and almost certainly will be truculent and defiant of authority, its prospect of success is not good.

Evangelicalism is, for the reasons above given, specially competent to guide and inspire the life of the future age, but whether it will have the courage and the wisdom to do so is quite another

matter. If it is prepared honestly to face the problems of the future and with patience and self-sacrifice to serve that day and generation, and if it faces its task as a body united in spirit and objective, then we may see the next generation a more Christian one than the present, expressing its religion possibly in a somewhat different fashion, but with the unchanging truth of God enshrined in its heart and guiding its life.

With the striking but somewhat repellent title, *The Inescapable Christ*, a book of remarkable interest by an American author, Dr. Walter Russell Bowie, has recently appeared. (John Murray, 6s. net.) It comes to English readers with a preface of warm and discriminating commendation from the Dean of St. Paul's. It is such an appeal as is greatly needed at the present time to the younger generation to follow Christ and to realize the fullness of His message and His service. Its title is suggested by the well known poem of Francis Thompson, *The Hound of Heaven*. Its keynote is, in the author's words, "So down the roadways of our restless time come the feet of the inescapable Christ. In mind and will we may flee him down many by-ways; but the reality that is in him cannot be out-distanced nor denied." Though primarily dealing with conditions of life and thought in America, the resemblances with those in our own country are so complete that its appeal will be equally effective with the younger generation in both. Dr. Bowie has a keen sense of the questions which are being asked, and the needs which are being felt by the sincere and earnest on every side. He recognizes the desire for reality in thought and action, the natural wish for the best method of self-expression, the problems of self-adjustment to existing institutions and to an environment in which are elements difficult to reconcile with ideals of the best life. On these and many similar matters he has sound advice to give as he interprets Christ in regard to each, in inspiring chapters on the inclusiveness of Christ, the simplicities of Christ, the formidableness of Christ and the gladness of Christ. One of the most helpful chapters is on the significance of the Church. American writers are distinguished by a prolific use of imagery. Dr. Bowie finds many effective similes to illustrate the value of the Church and its worship in the life of to-day, and shows how easily and unobservedly the life of a people may sink to a lower level by the simple neglect of all that the Church and its activities stand for. The book does not give the whole message of Christianity as Evangelicals interpret it, but there is sufficient in these chapters to give this book a special value to preachers in their endeavour to awaken and maintain a strong faith in Jesus and an earnest desire to follow Him.