

*JESUS OUR SUPREME TEACHER.*

WHEN Jesus on one occasion (St. Matt. xxiii. 8) strictly enjoined His disciples that they should not allow any of their number to usurp mastership over his brethren, and commanded them to acknowledge Him as the alone Lord of the conscience, it is evident that He had in His mind the intolerable bondage of thought into which the religious people of His day had fallen. His own disheartening experience as the chief of God's prophets lent a keen edge to His words, and are a complete illustration of their meaning. No teacher ever gave such pledges of Divine authority as Jesus; no people could have been better prepared for His evangel than the Jews. They had been set apart as in a cloister that they might hear the Divine voice, and a succession of prophets had come from the presence of God to declare the Divine will. A nation had been trained in the hope of the Messiah to wait for the dayspring from on high and the fulness of God's kingdom. It might have been expected that this well-tilled field would have been open soil for Jesus' words, and one dares to believe that there might have been an auspicious seedtime had the Jews passed, say, from Isaiah to Jesus, or had Jesus come while the glow of Daniel's visions were still fresh.

Unfortunately between the last of the great prophets and the advent of Jesus there came in one of the secondary periods which follow on an age of inspiration, when the intellectual consciousness of a people, hitherto running full and free, comes to a standstill and stagnates. No teacher of the first order arose to continue the stream of revelation, but in his place appeared that lower order of mind to which the letter is everything, on which the Spirit never breathes. The scribes sat in the seat of the prophets, and revelation

was succeeded by exposition. Under the hand of rabbis without insight or imagination the life departed from Hebrew thought, and nothing was left but empty bloodless forms, as when a flower is plucked and dried. Theological pedantry had done its work in the days of Jesus, and had reduced the sublime ethics of the Old Testament to a wearisome absurdity. The beneficent law of rest, so full of sympathy with struggling people, was translated into a series of regulations of peddling detail and incredible childishness. The clean heart of the prophets sank into an endless washing of hands, and filial piety was wantonly outraged that the temple taxes might be swollen. Jewish faith had become a painted show, a husk in which the kernel had withered.

It is, on first thoughts, inexplicable that any body of religious people—and one must admit that the Jews were the most religious people on the face of the earth—should have refused the luminous and winsome teaching of Jesus, and actually sent Him to the Cross for His evangel. When one thinks a little longer, and puts himself in the place of the contemporaries of Jesus, it comes home to him that they were not really able to receive the truth, and that he himself might, in the same circumstances, have condemned Jesus as a blasphemer. For the irresistible attraction of Jesus, as it now seems to us, was his reasonableness, and that was shown by His appeal at every turn to reality. "This is what I say, and you will see that this is what ought to be," was ever Jesus' argument, and to an honest mind, without bias or preoccupation, such a plea was unanswerable. But if the mind had long lost touch with truth at first hand, and was possessed by traditions about truth, then Jesus could have no access, and indeed might be only offensive. Jesus and the Jews were ever at cross purposes in this matter. He made His appeal past tradition to truth, and they disallowed this appeal and judged Him by tra-

dition, and by this standard there can be no doubt He was a heretic.

Jesus' attitude to tradition was quite clear, and consistent. It is not to be supposed that He denied the right or propriety of Jewish scholars studying and theorizing about the Old Testament Scriptures, for this were to cramp the just exercise of human reason. He would no doubt consider it a fitting tribute to revelation that earnest and able men should reason truth out unto her farthest conclusions and lessons for the guidance both of conscience and intellect. As it happened, the work of a sterile age did not yield much either of light or strength to generations following. But that was its misfortune, not its crime: the rabbis so far were within their rights and their duty. Theology, either in the department of dogma or ethics, requires no justification; it only calls for limitation. As soon as they proposed to bind their results upon their fellow-men with authority the scribes passed beyond their province and were guilty of treason against the free commonwealth of God's children. As dictators of faith and manners, Jesus resisted them without reserve or compromise, and forbade His followers to follow in their steps. The spiritual arrogance of the rabbis had been a blight on Judaism, and Jesus desired that His new religion should retain a perennial freshness. There was only one guarantee that Christianity would not share the same fate, and that was the continual return to Jesus.

When Jesus laid this injunction on His Apostles, He surely anticipated the history of His faith, and circumstances have justified His foresight. It is a necessity of the human mind to theorize about truth; it is a calamity to substitute theories for truth. One almost despairs at times because we seem the victims of an irresistible tendency to ignore the real, and to be content with the artificial. No sooner has some man of genius painted a picture or

conceived a poem, or even made a speech with moral intention, than people set themselves to invent amazing meanings and applications, and raise such a dust of controversy that the original effect is utterly lost. We are amused by the societies which are the custodians of Ruskin and Browning, but none can be indifferent to the manipulation of Jesus' words. If Jesus' delicate poetry be reduced to prose, and the fair, carved work of His parables be used for the building of prisons, and His lovely portrait of God be "restored" with grotesque colouring, and His lucid principles of life be twisted into harassing regulations, then Jesus has been much wronged, and the world has suffered irreparable loss. This is the disaster Jesus dreaded, and no one will deny that it has, in some degree at least, come to pass.

The footsteps of the holy Apostles had scarcely died away—concerning whose relation to Jesus something might be said—before the Fathers arose, and became, with the lapse of time, lords of the Christian conscience. Great theologians of the Middle Ages gradually took rank with the Fathers, while council after council, from Nice to Trent, saddled their accumulated dogmas on the Church. Chief Reformers almost literally dictated creeds to nations, and the pragmatical 17th century forged a yoke of doctrines so minute, tedious, and unreasonable that it became too irksome even for our more patient fathers. Every side of truth and every rite of Jesus was turned into a test by which honest-minded and simple-hearted disciples of Jesus were tried, condemned, cast out, burned. Unity was as much wanting as charity, for Christians in the matter of creed agreed in nothing except in ignoring the Gospels and persecuting one another. Romans rest on the councils down to the one that affirmed the infallibility of the pope; an Anglican goes back to the early councils and the Fathers; a Lutheran measures his faith by the Confession of Augs-

burg; and the Scottish Church seems to suppose that Christianity was only once thoroughly understood, when an assembly of English divines met at Westminster. Bodies of Christian folk have also ignored Jesus' warning against Rabbinitism, and have surrendered their birthright by allowing themselves to be called by the names of men, and so we have Socinians, Wesleyans, Cameronians, Morisonians, and what not. One denomination is called, with surely some slight want of humour, if not of reverence, "Lady Huntingdon's Connection"; and so it is made evident that a masterful woman can actually found a Church and lay down a creed. It comes as a shock on one to attend some heresy trial, and hear the prosecution quoting a foreign divine of almost miraculous woodenness and the defendant taking refuge in a second-rate commentator. If you were to ask, as is very natural, why neither will refer at once and finally to the words of Jesus, who can hardly have been silent on any point of importance, it would be at once explained that such a reference is an irrelevancy and a subterfuge, and one must admit that it would be an attempt to get behind the rabbis to Jesus. But does it matter much what any rabbi says? and is not the only vital question, What saith the Master?

There are certain rights which are legal; there are certain rights which are natural. No law can take away the latter, nor can a man divest himself of them by any form of engagement, and among the inherent rights of a Christian man is his appeal to Jesus as the one Judge of truth. It has often lain dormant in the Church; it has at times been powerfully exercised. Some one discovers that the water of life is clearer and sweeter from the spring than in a cistern, and shows the grass-grown path to the spring. Perhaps there has been no long period without some voice summoning Christians to break away from the tyranny of tradition and return to the liberty of Jesus.

This has been the work of all Reformers from Tauler to Luther, from Luther to Wesley—to unearth the evangel of Jesus from the mass of dogmas and rites which have overlaid it. Two parties have been in recurring conflict—the Traditionalists, who insist, “This is what our fathers have said, and what you must believe”; and the Evangelists, who declare, “This is what Jesus has said, and this only will we believe.” When Traditionalism has the upper hand, it burns its opponents, as the Roman Church did John Huss, or casts them out, as the Scotch Church did MacLeod Campbell; when Evangelism is strong, it clears an open space where men can breathe and see Jesus. By-and-by each evangelical movement loses its free spirit, and settles down into a new form of traditionalism. Brave hands clear away the covering from the ancient temple of truth, and then the generation following allow the sand-drift to cover its columns once more. It is a long battle between a handful of faithful men and the desert, and too often the desert has won.

The spirit of our day is so resentful of traditionalism as to be even impatient of theology, which is foolish; and to threaten faith, which would be ruin. No one, however, need be alarmed, for there is good reason to believe that the end will be the toleration of a noble science and the re-establishment of faith. When workmen come with pickaxe and shovel, it is either to destroy or discover, and the aim of present thought is discovery. Were earnest men rebelling against ancient dogmas because they were an integral part of Jesus’ teaching, this would be a very serious matter. This would be nothing short of a deliberate attack on Jesus. If they be only endeavouring to get past the results of theological science to the actual teaching of Jesus, then surely nothing could be more hopeful. This must issue in the revival of Christianity. There is no question that for some time dogmatic theology has been

at a discount. They say that both the Fathers and the Puritans are unsaleable, and this is to be regretted. But there can be little question that Biblical theology is at a premium, and this is of far more importance. Never have there been so many Lives of Jesus; never have His words been so anxiously studied. This is as it ought to be, and every Protestant ought to lift up his head. For what did the Reformers of the 16th century contend, but the right of Christian men to build their faith at first hand on the words of Holy Scripture? We are living in a second Reformation, and it were an immense blunder for us to go back on the principle of all Reformations, and insist directly or indirectly that Protestant councils should come in between Christians and Christ. "When I say the religion of Protestants," wrote Chillingworth, "I do not understand the doctrines of Luther, or Calvin, or Melancthon, nor the Confession of Augsburg or Geneva, nor the Catechism of Hiedelberg, nor the Articles of the Church of England; no, nor the harmony of all Protestant Confessions, but that wherein they all agree and which they subscribe with a greater harmony as the perfect rule of their faith and actions, that is the Bible." Perhaps the ground principle of one Reformation was never more admirably stated: the principle of our Reformation is an advance along the same line. The religion of Protestants, or let us say Christians, is not the Bible in all its parts, but first of all that portion which is its soul, by which the teaching of Prophets and Apostles must itself be judged,—the very words of Jesus.

As soon as any body of men band themselves together for a common object—whether it be making a railway or regenerating a world—they must come to an understanding, and promise loyalty. This is their covenant, which no man need accept unless he please, but which, after acceptance, he must keep. When Jesus founded that unique society which He called the Kingdom of God, and we

prefer to call the Church, it was necessary He should lay down its basis, and this is what He did in the Sermon on the Mount. For we ought not to think of that sermon as a mere detailed report of one of His numerous addresses, which often sprang from unexpected circumstances. It was not a defence against the Pharisee, like the 15th chapter of St. Luke, or an explanation to the disciples, like the 13th of St. Matthew. It was an elaborate and deliberate utterance, made by arrangement, and to a select audience. It was Christ's manifesto, and the constitution of Christianity. When Jesus opened His mouth, His new society was in the air. When He ceased, every one knew its nature, and also on what terms a man might belong to it. It would be very difficult to say which is the latest creed of Christianity; there is always some new one in formation, but there can be no question which is the oldest. Among all the creeds of Christendom the only one which has the authority of Christ Himself is the Sermon on the Mount. When one reads the Creed which was given by Jesus, and those which have been made by Christians, he cannot fail to detect an immense difference, and it does not matter whether he selects the Nicene Creed or the Westminster Confession. They all have a family likeness to each other, and a family unlikeness to the Sermon on the Mount. They deal with different subjects, they move in a different atmosphere. Were the Athanasian Creed and the Beatitudes printed in parallel columns, one would find it hard to believe that both documents were virtually intended to serve the same end, to be a basis of discipleship. It is not that they differ in details, one insisting on different points of one consistent covenant, but that they are constructed on different principles. When one asks, "What is a Christian?" the Creed and the Sermon not only do not give the same answer, but answers so contradictory that from the successive specifications he could create two types without



any more resemblance than a bird and a fish. We all must know many persons who would pass as good Christians by the Sermon, and be cast by the Creeds, and many to whom the Creeds are a broad way and the Sermon is a very strait gate. Since there is nothing we ought to be more anxious about than being true Christians, there is nothing we ought to think out more carefully than this startling variety.

What must strike every person about Jesus' sermon is that it is not metaphysical but ethical. What He lays stress upon are such points as these: the Fatherhood of God over the human family; His perpetual and beneficent providence for all His children; the excellence of simple trust in God over the earthly care of this world; the obligation of God's children to be like their Father in heaven; the paramount importance of true and holy motives; the worthlessness of a merely formal righteousness; the inestimable value of heart righteousness; forgiveness of sins dependent on our forgiving our neighbour; the fulfilling of the law of love, and the play of the tender and passive virtues. Upon the man who desired to be His disciple and a member of God's Kingdom were laid the conditions of a pure heart, of a forgiving spirit, of a helpful hand, of a heavenly purpose, of an unworldly mind. Christ did not ground this Christianity in thinking, nor in doing, but first of all in being. It consisted in a certain type of soul—a spiritual shape of the inner self. Was a man satisfied with this type, and would he aim at it in his own life? Would he put his name to the Sermon on the Mount, and place himself under Jesus' charge for its accomplishment? Then he was a Christian according to the conditions laid down by Jesus in the fresh daybreak of His religion.

When one turns to the Creeds, the situation has changed, and he finds himself in another world. They have nothing to do with character; they do not contain an idea of

character ; they do not ask pledges of character ; they have no place in their construction for character. From their first word to the last they are metaphysical, not ethical. They dwell on the relation of the three Persons in the Holy Trinity ; the Divine and human natures in the Person of Jesus ; His miraculous birth by the power of the Holy Ghost upon the Virgin Mary ; the connection between His sacrifice and the Divine law ; the nature of the penalty, and its reference to His Atonement ; the purposes of God regarding the salvation of individuals, and the collision between Free Will and Divine ; the means by which grace is conveyed to the soul ; the mysterious nature of the sacraments, and the intermediate state. From time to time those problems have been discussed, and the conclusions of the majority have been formed into dogmas which have been made the test of Christianity. If any one should decline assent to one or all of those propositions, as the case may be,—on the ground that he does not understand them, for instance,—and offers instead adherence to Jesus' Creed in the Sermon on the Mount, it would be thought to be beside the question ; just as if any one had declined obedience to Jesus' commandments, and offered instead acceptance of any theory of His Person, the Master would have refused His discipleship with grave emphasis.

It may, of course, be urged that Jesus said many things afterwards which must be added to the Sermon on the Mount, to form the complete basis of Christian discipleship, and that great discourse is sometimes belittled as an elementary utterance, to which comparatively slight importance should now be attached. Certainly Jesus did expound and amplify the principles of His first deliverance, but there is no evidence that he altered the constitution of His Kingdom either by imposing fresh conditions or omitting the old. Did He not teach on to the Cross that we stood to God as children to a Father, and must do His will ;

that for no sin there was or could be forgiveness till it was **abandoned**; that the state of the soul and not the mere outside life **was everything**; that the sacrifice of self, and not self-aggrandisement was **His method of salvation**; that love was life; and when He said, "Believe in Me; carry **My Cross**," was He not calling men to fulfil His Gospel? If one had come to Christ at Capernaum or Jerusalem, and said, "Master, there is nothing I so desire as to keep Thy sayings. Wilt Thou have me, weak and ignorant although I be, as Thy disciple?" can one imagine Christ then, or now, or at any time interposing with a series of doctrinal tests regarding either the being of God or the history of man? It is impossible because it would be incongruous. Indeed if Christ did revise and improve the conditions of discipleship, we should learn that from the last address in the Upper Room. But what was the obligation He laid then on the disciples' conscience, as with His dying breath? "This is My commandment, that ye love one another as I have loved you." It is the Sermon on the Mount in brief.

No church since the early centuries has had the courage to formulate an ethical creed, for even those bodies of Christians who have no written theological creeds, yet have implicit affirmations or denials of doctrine as their basis. Imagine a body of Christians which should take their stand on the sermon of Jesus, and conceive their creed on His lines. Imagine how it would have read, "I believe in the Fatherhood of God; I believe in the words of Jesus; I believe in the clean heart; I believe in the service of love; I believe in the unworldly life; I believe in the Beatitudes; I promise to trust God and follow Christ, to forgive my enemies and to seek after the righteousness of God." Could any form of words be more elevated, more persuasive, more alluring? Do they not thrill the heart and strengthen the conscience? Liberty of thought is allowed; liberty of sinning is alone denied. Who would refuse to sign this creed?

They would come from the east, and the west, and the north, and the south to its call, and even they who hesitated to bind themselves to a crusade so arduous would love it, and long to be worthy. Does one say it is too ideal, too unpractical, too quixotic? That no church could stand and work on such a basis? For three too short years the Church of Christ had none else, and it was by holy living, and not by any metaphysical subtleties, the Church lived, and suffered, and confessed for the first three centuries of the Christian era.

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### RECENT BIBLICAL LITERATURE.

SERMONS.—Foremost among the sermon literature of the present season must certainly be placed the remarkably handsome volume of *The Anglican Pulpit Library*, Sexagesima to Good Friday (Hodder and Stoughton). The editor of this volume modestly conceals his name; but, whoever he is, he certainly knows a good sermon. In the present volume we not only meet the welcome names of well-known preachers, but are also introduced to new names which must inevitably become well known. Mr. Winnington Ingram may especially be mentioned as a preacher who cannot but make his mark. As a representative selection of the preaching of to-day this volume has a present and permanent value.

Messrs. Isbister & Co. have added to their "Gospel and the Age" series some new volumes. One of these is Dr. R. F. Horton's *The Teaching of Jesus*. This volume is less revolutionary but more original and generally attractive than its author seems to believe. In his preface he leads his readers to suppose that he has done little more than popularize Wendt's *Teaching of Jesus* and Beyschlag's *New Testament Theology*. These works have made a deep impression upon Dr. Horton, as they must indeed bring unusual stimulus and instruction to all inquiring minds. But when he is prompted by his admiration to affirm that "few, even among theologians and preachers," have before these writers made a study of the teaching of Jesus we must demur. He would have been