

CHRISTIANITY TODAY



||| A PRESBYTERIAN JOURNAL DEVOTED TO STATING, DEFENDING
AND FURTHERING THE GOSPEL IN THE MODERN WORLD |||

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Christianity as a Power

“THE Kingdom of GOD is not in word but in power.” The statement just cited is from the pen of the apostle Paul (I Cor. 4:20). Paul draws a contrast between knowledge and power and reminded the Corinthians (and through them us) that for the establishing of Christianity in the world something more was needed than an addition to the world’s fund of knowledge, to wit—an addition to the world’s fund of power.

That Christianity adds to the world’s fund of power as well as to the world’s fund of knowledge finds its ultimate explanation in the person of CHRIST. If CHRIST were but a teacher and example, it would be proper to say that Christianity had come in word only; but inasmuch as He came primarily as a Saviour both from the guilt and the power of sin, it is absolutely necessary, in order to bring out anything like the whole truth, to say that it came also in power. Moreover here, as always, the earthly life of JESUS should be interpreted in the light of His resurrection and ascension. In JESUS CHRIST we have to do not merely with one who *was* but with one who lives today exerting a direct and moulding influence over the thoughts and lives of men similar to but vastly more extensive than He exerted in the days of His flesh. For only as we realize that CHRIST is today a living reality—who has lost none of His power with the lapse of the centuries—can we appreciate aright why the Scriptures speak of Christianity as the power of GOD unto salvation. In a word, Christianity is what it is because of what JESUS CHRIST himself is.

The consideration just alluded to is one of great practical importance. In fact our confidence not only that Christianity will never become extinct but that its truth and supremacy will yet be universally recognized, and our labor in the LORD not in vain, is closely bound up with our conviction that it does more than tell us what we should believe concerning GOD and what duty GOD requires of us. Our confidence as Christians is rooted in the fact that the religion we profess contains within itself a power, an energy, a dynamic that is destined to turn and overturn until “the kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our LORD and of His CHRIST.” Let us never forget, or allow others to forget, that Christianity makes available more than a knowledge of divine things plus the forgiveness of sins; it manifests a power through contact with which men are enabled to be and do

what otherwise would be impossible for them. Indeed, if we would direct attention to that which is most distinctive of Christianity—apart from the fact that it offers salvation from sin in and through the atoning death of its divine founder—we will do well to point to the great and abiding contribution it made to the world’s fund of power, to the fact that it brought into the complex of human history a new energy fully sufficient to meet the world’s needs and that will continue to meet the world’s needs until the end of time.

If Christianity, along with the assurance that there is forgiveness for past sins, merely substituted a correct for an incorrect conception of GOD and a perfect for an imperfect ideal of character and conduct, we would have no good reason to suppose that this better knowledge would ever get translated into character and conduct. The trouble with men generally is not so much their ignorance of what they ought to be and do as their failure to live up to the knowledge they possess. There is probably no man in whom practice does not lag behind knowledge. If men merely needed to know the truth in order to be led to put it into practice, the situation would be far different from what it actually is. But the facts being what they are, Christianity would never have been able to get any real footing in this world, nor would it be able to maintain the footing it now has, were it not for what we call its dynamic qualities. These dynamic qualities, as we have intimated, center in and radiate from the CHRIST who abides the same, yesterday, today and forever. The real CHRIST, in distinction from the

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mythical CHRIST of Modernism, is infinitely more than a teacher and example. The very nerve of the Christian religion, that apart from which it could never have gotten itself established in the world, let alone have become a world-historical influence, lies in the fact that not only for a few brief years in the long ago but through all the changing centuries that have followed it has been able to direct men to that all-powerful CHRIST of whom we learn in the Gospels. Certainly this element of power was not over-looked by the early exponents of Christianity. "I am not ashamed of the Gospel; for it is the power of God unto salvation," wrote Paul. "Thou hast given Him power over all flesh," wrote John. "The multitude glorified God who had given such power unto men," wrote Matthew. "The kingdom of God comes with power," wrote Mark. "His word was with power," wrote Luke. "We made known unto you the power of our LORD JESUS CHRIST," wrote Peter. "He upholds all things by the word of His power," wrote the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews. Such citations could be multiplied. Individually and as a whole they witness to the fact that the object of our faith as Christians is the living CHRIST clothed with the power of God.

In stressing this dynamic element, we are stressing something distinctive of Christianity. There are really but two kinds of religion—Christianity and all other kinds. All religions except Christianity, into whatever varieties they may divide, assume that men must save themselves if they are to be saved at all; Christianity, into whatever varieties it may divide, assumes that if men are to be saved at all they must be saved by a power outside of themselves, that in the strict sense of the words there is no such thing as a commendable self-made man. Other religions may inculcate excellent moral and spiritual lessons, may afford much wise counsel and good advice, but they know of no dynamic, no source of energy, except that which inheres in man as man. But Christianity, though it surpasses all other religions in the matter of spiritual insight and good advice, yet finds its distinctive note in the fact that it proclaims a divine redemption in and through the work of another, and so does infinitely more than first instruct and then arouse into activity those powers

which inhere in man as man. What is frequently overlooked in this connection is that Christianity is unique in this respect. As a great theologian has put it: "There are fundamentally only two doctrines of salvation: that salvation is from God, and that salvation is from ourselves. The former is the doctrine of common Christianity; the latter is the doctrine of universal heathenism."

We may properly speak of Christianity as static in the sense that it has a definite content of its own, given it once and for all by CHRIST and His apostles; but we can speak of it as quiescent and inactive only by shutting our eyes to the plainest facts of history. As a matter of fact Christianity has shown itself to be a manifestation of power as well as an exhibition of truth. How can this be reasonably questioned in view of the marvelous energy with which it has wrought in the life of our western world? Consult the historians and they tell us that it was not from Greece or Rome that the regeneration of human life came forth but from the cradle of Bethlehem and the cross of Calvary; and that the superiority of our western civilization finds its explanation in the potencies that were wrapped up in the gospel of the risen CHRIST that the apostles proclaimed. We are aware that many speak today of the Christian church as moribund and of its faith as outgrown, as dying and decadent; but we are far from supposing that they speak from adequate knowledge. With them the wish is father to the thought. It is not that the facts warrant such a conclusion; it is merely that they would have it so. It is true that the fortunes of Christianity are not today at flood tide; but it is well to remember that there have been even darker periods in the history of Christianity than that which exists today. It is not much over two hundred years ago since Bishop Butler wrote in his famous book *The Analogy of Religion*: "It has come I know not how to be taken for granted by many persons that Christianity is not so much as a subject of inquiry; but that it is now at length discovered to be fictitious. And accordingly they treat it as if in the present age this was an agreed point among all people of discernment; and nothing remained but to set it up as a principal subject of mirth and ridicule as it were by

way of reprisal for its having so long interrupted the pleasures of the world." Most of the so-called leading thinkers of that day thought that Christianity had exhausted its power, that it was a spent force, that its day was over. And yet it was but a short time after that when the great Wesleyan revival broke out and it was demonstrated afresh that the old Gospel was still a living and conquering power. It has ever been thus in the history of the Christian church. The darkness has ever preceded the dawn of a brighter and more glorious day. We may be sure that what has been true of the past will also be true of the future. And that because it is no mere human power but a divine power that energizes in Christianity. Ours is the gospel of the risen and exalted CHRIST, of the glorified Son of God. All power has been committed unto Him: His strength is therefore inexhaustible. Because He lives and is actively interested in the religion He founded, we may be sure that the gates of hell will not prevail against it, that, no matter what the opposition, it will go on conquering and to conquer. "Wherefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the LORD, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the LORD."

For the comfort and encouragement of those who share the viewpoint of CHRISTIANITY TODAY, it may not be out of place to point out that it is the Christianity of the New Testament, not that Christianity as it has been reconstructed by modern religious liberalism, that has exhibited these dynamic qualities. We may have no historical warrant for saying that liberal Christianity (so-called) lacks dynamic qualities; but we can say that, up-to-date at least, it has given no evidence of possessing dynamic qualities at all comparable to historic Christianity. The Christianity of the New Testament, however, taken at its face value—what is known as conservative Christianity—has shown abundant evidence of its power. No movement in history has been so influential. It has turned and over-turned, not only altering but ennobling the course of human history. It has yet many a battle to fight, but as it looks upon that boastful youth known as liberal Christianity, it may well address him in the words that the King of Israel

addressed to Benhadad: "Let not him that girdeth on his harness boast himself as he that putteth it off."

Doctrines as Related to Life

THE immediate occasion of this brief editorial is the recent merger of the Congregational and Christian churches on the basis of their common acceptance of Christianity as primarily a way of life—of which more may be learned in our news columns.

In our judgment this merger is based on a fundamental misapprehension of the place that doctrines occupy in the Christian religion. Unless we are greatly mistaken—in which case CHRIST and His apostles were mistaken—Christianity as a way of life is neither reasonable nor practicable except on the assumption of the truth of the doctrines of Christianity. Christianity is indeed a way of life; and yet the fact that one accepts Christianity as a way of life does not of itself indicate that he is a Christian. There is, in fact, no historical warrant for calling any one a Christian who does not worship CHRIST as GOD and who does not receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation from sin conceived as guilt and power and corruption, as was pointed out in some detail in our October (1930) issue. To suppose that the acceptance of Christianity as a way of life constitutes one a Christian harmonizes with the notion that men save themselves by following CHRIST's example. The distinctive thing about CHRIST in this connection, however, is not that He points out the way to salvation; He is the Way itself.

Our interest in Christian doctrines has a two-fold basis. In the first instance it rests on experience. As we interrogate our own souls we find that Christian experience, as we know it, is rooted in Christian doctrines. It was not until we believed in the reality of certain historic facts together with the explanation of those facts given in the Bible (i. e. certain doctrines) that we obtained a sense of sin forgiven, of divine sonship, of access to a living power by and through whom the power of sin in us was broken and we enabled to walk in newness of life, of a well-grounded hope of a blessed immortality—not to mention other marks of the

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the ministry of this paper by recommending it to your friends, or subscribing for them? The Editors are doing their utmost to give you a paper that will be second to none. Every subscription sent by our loyal friends counts mightily. We need your help to help the Church.

Christian life. If we read our souls aright, objective Christianity (i. e. the facts and doctrines of Christianity) is an indispensable antecedent to subjective Christianity (i. e. Christianity as it is lived and experienced by those like ourselves). To expect the Christian life to flourish apart from these facts and doctrines seems to us like expecting water to flow through pipes that have no connection with the central reservoir.

In the second instance, it rests on the knowledge that the founders of Christianity—CHRIST and His apostles—had this conception of the relation between doctrine and life. With them it was always first the doctrine and then the life. Recall the emphasis JESUS Himself threw on the Father's Word which had been given Him that He might give it to His followers. It was His desire that they might know the truth so that they might have eternal life and prayed that they might be sanctified by the truth, which truth He identified with God's Word. And then recall the conception of the relation between doctrines and life that dominates the epistles of PAUL. The Epistle to the Romans is in this respect typical of all his writings. First, there are eleven chapters of doctrinal exposition; then, there are five chapters that deal with Christianity as a way of life; but between these two sections there is what has been called his "tremendous therefore." "I beseech you *therefore*"—that is to say because of the great doctrines taught in the first eleven chapters of the epistle—live the life commended in the last five chapters. Only as we share PAUL's conception of the relation between doctrine and life can we appreciate the importance he attached to sound doctrine. He gloried in the fact that he was not as many who corrupted the Word of GOD, that word of divine grace which alone was able to build them up and give

them an inheritance among those who are truly sanctified. PAUL did not deem it sufficient that CHRIST was preached unless He was preached specifically as the crucified, i. e. unless the preaching of CHRIST was accompanied by sound teaching as to the significance of His death. "We may believe as we will; but it is very evident that the founders of Christianity earnestly believed, not that the so-called Word of God is the product of faith and its only use to witness to the faith that lies behind it and gives it birth, but that the veritable Word of God is the seed of faith, that faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God; or, in other words, that behind the Christian life stands the doctrine of CHRIST intelligently believed."

Our zeal for Christian doctrines is, therefore, not in the interest of a sterile intellectualism but in the interest of the Christian life itself. We are zealous for Christian doctrines because we desire, both for ourselves and others, a better exhibition of the life that is truly Christian. The doctrines of themselves are neither life nor a substitute for life. Who claims that they are? It does not follow, however, that they are not an essential condition of the life that is life indeed. Doctrines of themselves have no power to create life. Certainly not. The Holy Spirit alone has power to quicken dead souls into newness of life. It does not follow, however, that the Holy Spirit ordinarily exercises His life-giving power except in connection with the Word or that the Christian life may bud and blossom apart from Christian conceptions. In short, while Christianity is a life it is a life based on a message—a message that derives its content from CHRIST and His apostles—and only as that message is known and believed will the Christian life either exist or thrive.

The hope has been expressed that this merger marks the beginning of a new movement in church life. It is even prophesied that we will soon have a "United Church of Christ in America" based on the mere acceptance of Christianity as a way of life. We sincerely trust that such is not the case as it does not seem to us that confessionally speaking such a church could justify its right to be called a Christian Church in the New Testament meaning of the words.