

# CHRISTIANITY TODAY



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

SAMUEL G. CRAIG, Editor

H. McALLISTER GRIFFITHS, Managing Editor

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## Christianity and the Visible Church

THERE is great diversity of opinion concerning the relation between Christianity and the visible Church and *vice versa*. This diversity of opinion will be found in the main, we believe, to be rooted in and to grow out of different conceptions of Christianity itself. Here as elsewhere, if we mistake not, the primary question is the old yet ever new question, What is Christianity? Be that as it may, the problem of the relation between Christianity and the Church is one of great practical importance. It is not merely true that the different solutions offered have divided and sub-divided those who profess and call themselves Christians into different camps; it is also true that the solutions offered have had and continue to have a more or less determining influence in shaping their conception of their duties and obligations as Christians.

That view of the relation between Christianity and the Church which has prevailed most widely (thus far) has received its fullest and most consistent expression in Roman Catholic circles. According to this view the relation between Christianity and the visible Church is so close and vital that they become practically identical. According to the Roman Catholics, all of God's saving activities in the present dispensation are exercised through the instrumentality of the Church. They teach as fully as any that salvation is ultimately from God and so proclaim a supernatural salvation; but they hold that in distributing this supernaturally wrought salvation to individuals God employs

the Church as His exclusive agent. This means that the Church stands between the individual soul and God and that it is to the Church to which men must immediately look for salvation. This is not to say, of course, that the Roman Catholic supposes that the salvation that the Church dispenses has been obtained independently of CHRIST. He holds as explicitly as any that there is no salvation apart from CHRIST. None the less he holds that CHRIST in dispensing to men the benefits of His saving work operates not directly but through the instrumentality of the Church which He has established for that purpose. This matter is so important that for its fuller exposition we avail ourselves of the words of Dr. W. P. PATTERSON of Edinburgh:

"Observe the extraordinarily important place that is occupied in the Roman Catholic

scheme of salvation by the idea of the Church. It is hardly incorrect to say that in the Roman Catholic conception the central feature of the Christian religion is the supernatural institution which represents CHRIST, which carries on His work, and which acts as the virtual mediator of the blessings of salvation. Instead of making the relation of the believer to the Church depend on his relation to CHRIST, it makes his relation to CHRIST depend on his relation to the Church. It may not be anywhere expressly affirmed that the Church is the central provision of Christianity, but it is certain that the doctrine of the Church dominates and colors the whole interpretation of the Christian dispensation. . . . Its vocation or commission is nothing less than the perpetuation of the work of the Redeemer. It does not of course supersede the work of CHRIST. Its presupposition is that CHRIST, the eternal Son of God, laid the foundation of its work in His incarnation and His atoning death; that from Him come ultimately all power, authority and grace; and that as from Him all spiritual blessing proceeds, so that to Him belongs all the glory. But in the present dispensation the Church, in large measure, has taken over the work of CHRIST. It is, in a real sense, a re-encarnation of CHRIST to the end of the continuation and completion of His redemptive mission. Through His Church CHRIST continues to execute the offices of a Prophet, of a Priest, and of a King. His prophetic office it perpetuates by witnessing to the truth once delivered to the saints and by interpreting and determining doctrine with infallible authority. . . . It represents Him so completely in the priestly function of mediation between God and man that there is no covenanted salvation outside the pale of the visible organization of which He is the unseen Head. It further represents Him as sacrificing priest by the perpetual repetition in the Mass of the oblation He once offered upon the cross. . . . And finally it administers the kingly power of CHRIST on earth. It has an absolute claim to the

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even of that measure of devotion which He is receiving from modern men.

A somewhat similar alternative faces us when we consider Paul. He too advanced stupendous claims. His claims were, indeed, infinitely less than the claims of Jesus; he certainly never presented himself as God; he never presented himself as a supernatural person. But though he did not present himself as a supernatural person, he did present himself as one who had a supernatural commission.

Men have tried to evade the issue presented by such a claim. They have tried to push the claim into the background in the account which they give of the life of Paul. They have made excuses for the apostolic consciousness of Paul as they have made excuses for the Messianic consciousness of Jesus; they have tried to show that it was psychologically necessary in that age, that it was the temporary form in which Paul expressed an abiding experience. They have tried to admire Paul the man, after they have ceased to believe that he was, in the sense in which he meant the word, an apostle of Jesus Christ.

But all such efforts are vain. These "Liberal" historians, with their polite excuses for Paul, are farther perhaps from the truth about him than are the radicals who, attending to his stupendous claims, abhor him and all his works. Paul refuses to be placed in the mould in which men try to place him today. Unless his commission was supernatural in the high sense in which he represented it as being, unless it was totally different in kind from the commission of ordinary Christians or the greatest of the saints of the historic Church or the greatest of religious geniuses, then he was a mere visionary and enthusiast, and all his defence against his detractors in Galatia and elsewhere was but the work of an overwrought and irascible man. But if the Lord Jesus really appeared to him on the road to Damascus and made him, not by any human agency but in very presence, an apostle instead of an enemy, then his defence of his apostleship was defence not of himself but of his Lord, and then, too, his Epistles are part of God's holy Word, not one whit inferior in authority to the words which Jesus spoke when He was on earth.

policy of doctrinal inclusiveness that has been followed by the Northern Church. On page 59 we read: "The New School Union of 1869-70; the Revision Question of 1889; the Cumberland Union of 1904; the Auburn Affirmation of 1923; the latitude taken by New York Presbytery in ordaining ministers; the failure of the 1927 Assembly to judicially rebuke this attitude; the ideal of 'an inclusive church' avowed by Northern leaders, are to Columbia Seminary like so many stones in a vast pyramid of difficulty in the way of organic union."

An interesting and what may prove to be a very significant fact in connection with efforts to reunite the churches is recorded on page 66: "The perpetuation of the Southern Church is guarded by a legal seal. The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in the United States provides that full organic union and consolidation with any other ecclesiastical body can only be effected by the approval of two General Assemblies and the consent of three fourths of the Presbyteries; and that this paragraph can only be amended by the same vote."

Dr. Robinson is not unknown to the readers of CHRISTIANITY TODAY having contributed the articles, "The Gospel of Jesus" (July, 1930) and "Is the Church Forgetting God?" (May and June, 1931).

S. G. C.

*THE BASIS OF EVOLUTIONARY FAITH: A CRITIQUE OF THE THEORY OF EVOLUTION, by Floyd E. Hamilton, Th.M. James Clarke & Company, London. pp. 222. Six shillings. (May be obtained through CHRISTIANITY TODAY for \$1.50.)*

## Books of Religious Significance

*COLUMBIA THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY AND THE SOUTHERN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, by Wm. Childs Robinson, A.M., Th.D., D.D. Dennis Lindsey Printing Co., Decatur, Georgia. pp. 233 \$1.75.*

THIS volume by the Professor of Church History and Polity of Columbia Theological Seminary should command a wider interest than its title might indicate. While it is primarily a history of Columbia Theological Seminary, having been presented at the celebration of its Centennial and bearing the endorsement of the Board of Directors of that institution, it deals with questions of thought and life that have agitated the whole Southern Presbyterian Church during the last one hundred years. What is more, it deals with matters that have an important bearing on present-day problems, particularly with the question of organic union between the Northern and Southern Presbyterian churches. Special interest attaches to what is said about the question of slavery, the reasons for the division of the Presbyterian Church between the North and the South, the differences in the field of Church polity between Thornwell and

Hodge, the evolution controversy in connection with Prof. Woodrow, and the theology of Thornwell in as far as it is distinguished from the old Princeton theology. No student of Church history or of Church polity or of theology can afford to ignore this volume.

Dr. Robinson points out that there are two great obstacles in the way of a reunion of the Northern and Southern Presbyterian churches. The first of these is difference of attitude of the two churches relative to the spirituality of the Church. While the Northern Church since the days of the Civil War has permitted political questions to influence its actions and on occasion has even made political pronouncements, the Southern Church insists that political matters are outside the province of the Church. On page 61 Dr. Robinson points out that in the Baltimore Assembly in 1926 spokesmen for all three groups within the Northern Church (the Conservative, Liberal and Mediating) condemned the doctrine of the non-participation by the church in political or secular matters as that doctrine is embraced in the Southern Church.

The second of these great obstacles is the

IN 1927 Professor Hamilton gave us his book, *The Basis of Christian Faith: A Modern Defense of the Christian Religion* (George H. Doran Co. N. Y. \$2.25)—the book which still contains the best comprehensive apology for the faith "once delivered to the saints," fitted to meet the needs of college students and other non-professional men and women who have doubts as to the validity of the Christian religion, of which we have knowledge.

In this book Professor Hamilton has given us a critique of a faith which as it is ordinarily presented is a rival of the Christian faith. Professor Hamilton is aware, of course, that there are advocates of "Christian Evolution" but, as he points out, these include practically no evolutionists of standing. "The kind of evolution that is being taught in most schools and colleges, with perhaps a few notable exceptions," he rightly says, "is not only anti-Biblical and anti-Christian, but antitheistic." Moreover, as he also points out, most of those who maintain that there is no conflict between evolution and Christianity really mean that there is no conflict between evolution and that kind of Christianity that "eliminates the first chapters of Genesis, does away with the