

# CHRISTIANITY TODAY



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

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## The Outlook for Christianity

EVERY judgment as to the present status of Christianity is necessarily determined by the answer given to the question, What is Christianity? If everything called Christianity is really Christianity, it is safe to say that its status was never as favorable as at the present time. The statisticians tell us that there are more people in the world today who call themselves Christians than ever before. Moreover despite the situation in Russia and public opposition to Christianity in certain circles in Europe and America, there is relatively little professed antagonism to Christianity. Practically everybody, including those who are hostile to the Church in all its branches, claim that their views are "essentially" Christian. There is much criticism of this and that expression of Christianity but there is little professed criticism of Christianity as such. Surely if all that is called Christianity is rightly so called the outlook for Christianity is the most favorable that has been known since Pentecost.

If, then, we define Christianity (as many do in effect) as what is held in common by those who profess and call themselves Christians, we will judge that the outlook for Christianity is exceedingly optimistic. Suppose, however, that some of those who call themselves Christians are not Christians at all—as the Scriptures lead us to expect. Then what is held in common would contain nothing but what is held by non-Christians as well as Christians. But even if it be true (as of course it is not) that all who profess and call themselves

Christians are really Christians, the definition of Christianity that would result would express only the minimum of Christianity, the very least that a man can hold and still rightly call himself a Christian. Otherwise the least adequate forms of Christianity would be excluded. Suppose we ask the question, What is a man? Do we merely want to know what all men have in common? If so we are seeking for a definition of a man that will adequately describe only the poorest, meanest, least developed specimen of a man that exists. Surely, however, when we ask such a question we want to know what a normal or representative man is. It is not otherwise when we ask, What is Christianity? We want to know what normal Christianity is, not the most attenuated form of thought that can possibly be called Christianity. A definition of Christianity that gives expression only to what is held in common by those who call themselves Christian will at the most express only the minimum of Christianity, even if all those who call themselves Christians are

actually such. Inasmuch, however, as "they are not all Israel that are of Israel" it is obvious that it will not express even that. It will merely express what Christianity has in common with natural religion and so will lack everything that is distinctive of Christianity.

The mere fact, then, that so many people profess and call themselves Christians today affords no real warrant for supposing that the outlook for Christianity is highly favorable—true as it is that this fact is in itself fitted to justify the belief that the fortunes of Christianity are now at flood tide.

"Modernists" and "Fundamentalists," moreover, are at least agreed in maintaining that the number of those who profess and call themselves Christians warrants no definite conclusion as to the actual status of Christianity. According to the "Modernists," almost immediately after his death the "religion of Jesus" (i.e. the religion that Jesus is alleged to have taught and exemplified) was transformed, re-fashioned, radically altered by his earliest disciples, under the influence of their pre-Christian beliefs, a tendency that was continued under the influence of the theological notions of PAUL (largely pagan in origin according to the Modernists) and that reached its culmination in the historical creeds of the churches—with the result that the knowledge of real Christianity was almost completely lost until it was re-discovered by the Modernists, dug up as it were out of the debris under which it had been covered for some eighteen hundred years. When it is remembered that according to the

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Modernists even such doctrines as the deity and atoning death of JESUS are of pagan origin—doctrines central to Christianity as it is generally understood in Greek, Roman and Protestant circles—it goes without saying that in the eyes of the Modernists the fact that so many profess and call themselves Christians does not mean that real Christianity is widely held. It is not long since Dr. FOSDICK was quoted as having said that ninety per cent of our present-day Christianity is paganism. On the other hand the "Fundamentalists" because they hold that real Christianity is essentially the same as historic Christianity, as it is set forth in the New Testament and the major creeds of the churches, look upon Modernism as an apostasy from rather than a re-discovery of Christianity. Few, if any, "Fundamentalists" would go so far as to say that ninety per cent of present-day Christianity is something other than what they regard as genuine Christianity; but practically all of them do hold that Modernism (or other departures from Christianity equally bad) is widespread to such a degree that no sound inference can be drawn from the number of those who profess and call themselves Christians as to the actual status of Christianity.

It ought to be clear to all—so at least it seems to us—that it is impossible to make any serious estimate as to the present status of Christianity without first answering the question, What is Christianity? As a result much of what is said in the name of Christianity contains no comfort for us as we scan the future. It is no comfort to us to find a man expressing optimism as to the future of Christianity, if what he calls Christianity is something other and different from what we call Christianity. For that would mean that the growth of what he calls Christianity would mean the decline of what we call Christianity. If, for instance, as we scanned the future, we could foresee the universal triumph of consistent Modernism, i.e. of a religion that rejects the cross as an atoning sacrifice and CHRIST Himself as an object of worship and that denies that salvation is by grace through faith, we would be forced to believe that the time is coming when Christianity (as we

understand it) will be a dead religion.

In previous issues of CHRISTIANITY TODAY (especially in that of June, 1930) we have indicated what we mean when we make mention of Christianity. Suffice it to say in this connection that by Christianity we mean Christianity as it was all but universally understood previous to the rise of Modernism in the eighteenth century. This means, broadly speaking, that when we make mention of Christianity we have in mind the sum-total of the saving truths taught in Holy Scripture. More particularly that redemptive religion that centers in CHRIST as the GOD-MAN, and that offers salvation from sin as guilt and power and pollution through His expiatory death—immediately and fully as regards guilt but by stages and degrees as regards power and pollution that reach perfection only in the life to come. Understanding Christianity as we do, we are unable to persuade ourselves that the immediate outlook for Christianity is favorable. No doubt when we compare the present situation with that which existed in the early centuries we find much that is fitted to hearten and encourage; but when we compare the existing situation with that which existed a generation ago we find much to depress and discourage. And that because we find it impossible to conceal from ourselves the fact that in recent years there has been a wide-spread apostasy from real Christianity—an apostasy that seems to be growing rapidly, that is influential in all the churches and that is the dominating or almost the dominating influence in some of the churches. If the present tendencies continue unchecked, the immediate outlook for what we call Christianity is dark.

But while, from our point of view, the immediate outlook for Christianity is unfavorable, we would not be understood as implying that the situation warrants any weakening of our confidence as to the *ultimate* triumph of Christianity. That would be true only if we had lost confidence in the truthfulness of Christianity. We, however, are not of those who believe that advancing knowledge has disproved the truth of Christianity, as we define it. If we did, we would no longer call ourselves Chris-

tians as we hold that our definition of Christianity is the only one that can be historically justified. Because we believe Christianity to be true, we are confident that the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

But while our confidence as to the ultimate triumph of Christianity is inextricably bound up with our conviction of its truthfulness, it does not rest on this alone. It rests also on the conviction that the CHRIST who stands at its center, and makes it what it is, is more than a teacher and example, that He is also the living and reigning LORD. If Christianity were but one system of thought and life among others struggling for the suffrage of men, we would have small confidence in its ability to maintain itself—not because it is intellectually indefensible but because it must make its appeal to sinners and so to those who are prejudiced against it both as a system of thought and a way of life. Christianity is not merely a system of thought and life, it is a redeeming activity at work in the world. CHRIST not only taught, He acted; moreover He not only was, He is; and as age succeeds age He remains the same yesterday, today and forever.

We do not pretend to say what the immediate future has in store for Christians. It may be that the love of more and more will wax cold. It may be that Christians are facing persecutions as bad or even worse than those of the early centuries. It is a cross, not a crown that CHRIST promises His followers on earth. But be the immediate future of Christianity what it may, JESUS being what He is the Living LORD, clothed with the power of God, we may be sure that the religion that centers in Him will, despite all opposition, make its way to ultimate victory. They reckon apart JESUS CHRIST who suppose that Christianity, as the church of all ages has understood it, is a spent force and about to be classed as a dead religion. In this confidence let us go forward. PAUL's exhortation has lost none of its significance with the passing years: "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 vain in the LORD."