

CHRISTIANITY TODAY



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

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What is Christianity?

IT may seem strange that in this year of our Lord, 1930, men should be discussing the question, What is Christianity? But whether it be strange or not, the question is being everywhere debated and the most divergent answers given, and passionately defended, even by those calling themselves Christians. Nothing in fact is doing more to render matters "confused and confusing" in the sphere of religious discussion at the present time than the fact that those who are carrying on the discussion have radically different notions of what Christianity is. When the doctors disagree—men of equal ability and sincerity it may be—what is the plain man to do? Many will agree when a modern scholar says: "I can imagine a man exclaiming, in no flippant spirit, that it is more difficult to discover what Christianity is than to believe it when it is discovered."

Some define Christianity as "the religion of JESUS," meaning the religion that JESUS Himself taught and practiced, and so look upon JESUS as little more than the first Christian. Others think it little short of blasphemy to speak of JESUS as a Christian at all, as such a mode of speech erases the distinction between the Saviour and the saved, between the Lord and His followers; and so define Christianity rather as the religion that has JESUS as its object. Some identify Christianity with loyalty to a cause or ideal, some with altruism, some with CHRIST-like morality, some with man's religious and ethical life at its highest. We hear of a Christianity without miracles, without doctrines, even of a Christianity without

CHRIST—and, as though nothing was too extreme to lack advocates, of a Christianity without GOD. Moreover Christian Science and New Thought and Theosophy and Russellism and Mormonism and Spiritualism—and what not?—either call themselves Christianity or claim to include its essential values. Surely if everything that is called Christianity today is rightly so-called it must be confessed that the word, "Christianity," is a meaningless word, a word into which we can pour whatever content may suit our convenience.

The seriousness of the situation is greatly enhanced by the fact that divergent answers to our question are being given within as well as without the churches. It would be natural to expect that in the pulpits of professedly Christian churches and in the class-rooms of

professedly Christian schools of learning essentially the same answer would be given to this question. Such is not the case. The situation is rendered even more serious by reason of the amazing ignorance that exists among the rank and file of the Church. In no respect has the modern Church failed more signally than in the exercise of its teaching function. As a result there are multitudes in the pews unable to discriminate between true Christianity and Christianity falsely so-called. Do we need to look further to account for the fact that so many members of Christian churches fall easy victims to every popular expounder of a new Ism, provided it is labeled with the Christian name? The saddest phase of the matter is that multitudes are embracing systems of thought and life that lack everything distinctive of genuine Christianity, that in fact are positively hostile to all that is distinctive of such Christianity, while cherishing the delusion that they are Christianity's purest confessors and exemplars and as such its heirs and beneficiaries.

We are not indeed to suppose that our age is the only age that has debated this question. In the nature of the case it takes precedence of all others whenever Christianity becomes a subject of discussion. Such questions as, Is Christianity true? What is the value of Christianity? What are its claims on our belief and acceptance? are meaningless until we know what Christianity is. Christianity may or may not be true; how can we judge until we know what it is? It may be worthless or beyond price; how can we

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appraise its value until we know the thing that is to be appraised? It may or may not be entitled to our belief and acceptance; how can we decide until we know what sort of thing it is? Whenever Christianity has been discussed, therefore, this question has been central. This was the question at issue in the first century between PAUL and the Judaizers, in the fifth century between AUGUSTINE and PELAGIUS, in the sixteenth century between the Reformers and the Romanists, in the eighteenth century between the Evangelicals and the Deists. There is this significant difference, however, in the situation in the twentieth century as compared with previous centuries, at least if we except the conflict between Christianity and heathenism in the first three centuries. In previous centuries the issue was, for the most part at least, between more or less perfect and more or less imperfect answers to our question. Today, however, the issue is between answers that involve the very right of Christianity, as it has all but universally been understood, to exist.

It is often assumed, especially by popular writers and the less responsible advocates of Church union, that we can obtain a sufficiently exact answer to our question by ascertaining what is held in common by those professing and calling themselves Christians, what is held in common being regarded as essential and what is held in distinction being regarded as non-essential. Suppose, however, that among those who profess and call themselves Christians there are some who are not Christians at all. Then what is held in common would include nothing distinctively Christian and the answer obtained radically false. But even if all those who profess and call themselves Christians were really Christians, such a method would at the best give us an answer that expressed the minimum of Christianity, the very least that a man can hold and still honestly and intelligently call himself a Christian. Otherwise the most attenuated forms of Christianity of which we have any knowledge would be excluded. Suppose we are asked the question, What is a man? Would it be sufficient to include in our answer only what all men have in common? If so, our definition of a man would fully apply only to the poorest,

meanest, least developed specimen of a man that exists. Otherwise there would be something in our definition that all men do not possess. Surely when we ask, What is a man? we want to know what constitutes a normal representative man. And surely when we ask, What is Christianity? what we want to know is not what is the most attenuated, contentless form of thought that can possibly be called Christianity but what constitutes typical, representative Christianity. We may learn much by questioning those who call themselves Christians, but we need only remind ourselves of that diversity of belief that exists among professed Christians to perceive how impossible it is by such a method alone to obtain anything like a satisfactory answer to our question.

In seeking an answer to our question, it is of first importance that we realize that it is an historical question, and that history and history alone can supply us with the right answer. Our question does not differ in kind from the question, What is Darwinism? In answering the question, What is Darwinism? much help may be obtained from the writings of DARWIN'S disciples, but unless there is constant reference to the writings of DARWIN himself we may find at the end of the day that we have substituted what is merely called Darwinism for what is really Darwinism. And so in answering the question, What is Christianity? unless there is constant reference to the New Testament, in which alone the beliefs which are specifically Christian are authoritatively set forth, we may end by substituting in greater or less degree what is merely called Christianity for what is really Christianity. Only as we realize that Christianity is an "historical" or "positive" or "founded" religion that had a definite beginning in the life, teaching and work of a particular historic person, and so derive our conception of what Christianity is from the teachings of CHRIST and His apostles, will we arrive at results that will enable us to say to what extent the things called Christianity today are real Christianity and to what extent they are Christianity falsely so-called.

There is special need, perhaps, to point out that the question, What is Christianity? is not to be confused with the

rational question, What is true? or with the ethical question, What is moral? or with the practical question, What is valuable? When men argue that certain doctrines are not truly Christian because they are irrational or immoral or worthless, they are forgetting that history and history alone can decide what doctrines are truly Christian. Christianity may be as false as some suppose, as worthless as others suppose, as harmful as still others suppose; but what has that to do with the question as to what manner of thing it is? We have no more right to approach the question, What is Christianity? with the assumption that it is the rational, moral and ideal religion than we have to approach the question, What is Mohammedanism? with the same assumption. We may or may not agree with those who think that the time has come to abandon the religion founded by JESUS CHRIST and practiced ever since by His disciples, and substitute something better for it, but at any rate we can discover what is truly Christian, what is legitimately called Christianity, only by an appeal to history, more particularly to that period of history that is recorded in the New Testament. This is not to say that nothing is to be learned from the later historical manifestations of Christianity. ATHANASIUS and AUGUSTINE and ANSELM and LUTHER and CALVIN, not to mention others, have not labored in vain. But it is to say that everything that is essential to Christianity must be able to present New Testament credentials.

It is true, of course, that even those who recognize that the question, What is Christianity? is an historical question, the authoritative answer to which is found in the Bible and the Bible alone, do not altogether agree in the answer they give to the question. Lutherans, Calvinists and Arminians give answers that differ in important respects. The time is past, however, when Unitarians and such like can claim that their peculiar views are taught in the Bible, true as it is that the older Unitarians so claimed. Now it is all but universally recognized that the Bible is on the side of orthodoxy as expressed in the great historic creeds. Everywhere it is confessed that according to the Bible Christianity is that specific religion that had its origin, and that

has its continuance, in the person and work of JESUS CHRIST, He being conceived of after so exalted, so supernatural a fashion that He is placed side by side with GOD as a proper object of worship; more particularly that redemptive religion that brings to man salvation from sin, felt as guilt and power and pollution, through the expiatory death of JESUS CHRIST, for eternity as well as for time—a religion, therefore, that is confessedly through and through supernatural not only as regards what happened some two thousand years ago but as regards what happens in human hearts today and as regards what is yet to happen in the days to come.

But while modern scholars of diverse types freely admit that the Christianity set forth in the Bible is the kind of religion that has been indicated, and that such is the meaning that it has all but universally had for its adherents, it is well known that this is not the conception of Christianity that prevails among "liberal" scholars. In order to maintain that genuine Christianity is other than what we have indicated, however, they are compelled to maintain that the Church has all but universally been mistaken as to what true Christianity is. What they assert is in brief, that Christianity was no sooner established than it departed from type, that "the religion of JESUS" almost immediately after His death was transformed, refashioned, made over, under the influence of the beliefs of His earliest followers; that a little later it was still further modified by the theological constructions of PAUL; so that it is with Paulinism rather than Christianity with which Church history for the most part concerns itself since it is only recently, thanks to modern research, that true Christianity has been recovered, dug out as it were from the debris that had covered it for some 1800 years. We are confident, however, that a sounder scholarship has abundantly shown the flimsy basis on which this re-writing of Church history rests. As a matter of fact there is no such line of cleavage between PAUL and the primitive Christians, or between the primitive Christians and JESUS, as these would have us suppose. Not only in the mind of PAUL but in the minds of the primitive Christians, and not only in the minds of

the primitive Christians but in the mind of JESUS himself, Christianity is a religion that centers in JESUS CHRIST as the GOD-MAN and in Him as crucified.

We may or may not like such a religion. We may accept it or we may reject it. We may regard it as rational or irrational. We may think it moral or immoral. We may value it as our chief treasure, as that without which we would be utterly undone, or we may regard it as without value or even as a thing to be gotten rid of because positively harmful. But be our judgment of it what it may, it is utterly futile—in the presence of the informed—to deny that as a matter of fact Christianity is the sort of religion we have indicated.

"Speaking the Truth in Love"

IT is an important but difficult obligation which PAUL lays upon us when he exhorts us to speak the truth in love—important because the truth as revealed in CHRIST is the supreme need of our fellows, but difficult because it is so hard to maintain that healthy union between zeal for sound doctrine and love for others which is necessary on the part of those who would bear effective witness to the gospel of the grace of God.

In this exhortation the primary emphasis is on speaking *the truth*. Here the golden words of CALVIN are to the point: "Necessary duties must not be omitted through fear of any offence; as our liberty should be subservient to charity, so charity itself ought to be subservient to the purity of the faith. It becomes us, indeed, to have regard to charity; but we must not offend GOD for the love of our neighbor."

At the same time the emphasis on speaking the truth *in love* is hardly less strong. We must place the emphasis on both nouns if we would rightly grasp the meaning of this exhortation. Love should be the element in which the truth is spoken and speaking the truth should be a manifestation of love. On the one hand we can do our fellows no greater disservice, can no more clearly exhibit our lack of intelligent love for them, than by withholding from them the truth. On the other hand we render them an almost equal disservice, in some instances perhaps an even greater disservice, if we set

forth the truth, no matter in how pure a form, in an unloving manner. The history of doctrinal controversy teaches us only too clearly that the truth may be proclaimed in pride and bitterness and hatred rather than in love, to such an extent that it is often uncertain to what extent the world's hatred has been provoked by hatred of the truth itself and to what extent it has been provoked by lovelessness, bitterness and fanaticism on the part of those proclaiming it.

Love itself, provided it be an intelligent love, will sanction no paltering with the truth. It will insist that the truth be proclaimed without fear or favor not only because it is worse to offend GOD than to offend man but because the truth as it is in JESUS (which PAUL had in mind when he penned this maxim) is the supreme need of our fellows, that without a knowledge of which they can have no well-grounded hope either for this life or the life to come. In proportion therefore as we truly love our fellows, and so desire to promote their truest and their highest welfare, we will feel constrained to bear witness to the gospel of the grace of GOD whether men bless or whether men curse. It is equally true, however, that in proportion as we love our fellows there will be lacking in us an egoistic interest in salvation, unconcern and indifference as to whether others share our faith and hope. In fact in proportion as we both rightly value the truth and truly love our fellows will we be able to appreciate those other words of PAUL's: "I have great sorrow and unceasing pain in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were anathema from CHRIST for my brethren's sake." Such was PAUL's realization of the indispensableness of the Gospel and such was his concern for the salvation of his "kinsmen according to the flesh" that he would have been willing to sacrifice his own salvation if thereby he could have redeemed his brethren. But while PAUL expressed himself as willing to sacrifice *himself* in the interest of his fellows he never manifested any tendency to sacrifice the *truth* in their interest; and that because love itself, not to mention loyalty to Him whose he was and whom he served, would not allow him to pare down or otherwise weaken his testimony to the gospel of the grace of GOD as made known in JESUS CHRIST.

The Passing of Professor Harnack

THE death of ADOLPH VON HARNACK on June 10th, at the age of 79, was widely reported in American newspapers under the date of June 11th, as was to be expected in view of the powerful influence he has exerted on religious thinking, in America as well as in Europe, during the last three or four decades.

Professor HARNACK's influence was particularly significant in furthering the interest of the so-called liberal theology with its identification of Christianity with the "religion of JESUS" rather than with the religion that has JESUS as the object of its worship, trust and obedience. According to Professor HARNACK "the Gospel, as JESUS proclaimed it, has to do with the FATHER only and not with the SON." This means that according to HARNACK, JESUS Himself occupies no indispensable place in the Christian religion, any more than CALVIN occupies an indispensable place in Calvinism or WESLEY in Methodism, that the uniqueness of JESUS lies in the fact that He was the first Christian, and that to be a Christian is to hold views concerning God and man and the world similar to those held by JESUS and to manifest in our lives those graces of the SPIRIT that were so conspicuous in Him.

Inasmuch as according to the all but universal belief of the Christian Church, at least until the rise of modern religious liberalism, JESUS occupies an absolutely indispensable place in the Christian religion—He being in fact its present object of worship and the constant source of its vitality—it is obvious that in order to hold that JESUS Himself is not central to the Gospel we must hold that almost the entire historical manifestation of what we call Christianity has to do with something other than the Gospel as JESUS taught it. This is in fact what those who define Christianity as the "religion of JESUS," rather than the "religion that has JESUS as its object," hold. What HARNACK, BOUSSET, WREDE, and their host of followers, assert in this connection has been mentioned in our leading editorial. In addition to what was said there—the "sounder scholarship" to which we there referred is represented by such men as WARFIELD, DENNEY and MACHEN—at-

tention should be directed to the fact that there is today a vigorous revolt against the conclusions of the "liberal theology" even in unorthodox circles (see review of DR. BRUNNER's *The Theology of Crisis* in our last issue) and that as a result the influence of HARNACK and his school is decidedly on the wane. If reports are well-grounded it is the lecture-rooms of the Barthian rather than those of the Ritschlian theologians which are being crowded by present-day students in Germany.

If we mistake not the death of Professor HARNACK marks not only the passing of a great scholar but the passing of a religious epoch. The epoch to which we refer is that of the dominance of the so-called "religion of JESUS." We do not mean to imply that the "religion of JESUS" movement is dead. It still supplies the main content of countless sermons and popular articles, but Professor HARNACK who did so much to secure for it such wide-spread acceptance lived to see its influence begin to wane. Had he lived another decade we are confident that he would have been conscious of occupying an outgrown point of view. There is something pathetic in the thought of a great scholar having devoted his splendid talents with unwearied energy for more than fifty years in the erecting of a scholastic superstructure that begins to crumble ere he lays down his tools; but that, sooner or later, is the fate that awaits every workman who fails to give adequate recognition to the fact that the Bible is the Word of God, and that "other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is JESUS CHRIST"—JESUS CHRIST being none other than the GOD-MAN who bore our sins in His own body on the tree.

The Moderator of the 142nd Assembly

DR. HUGH THOMSON KERR was elected Moderator of the 142nd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. on the first ballot by the largest vote received by any candidate in recent years. As a presiding officer DR. KERR would be difficult to improve on. He was particularly felicitous in his responses to delegates and others who brought greetings to the Assembly. Throughout he manifested a commendable

desire to be just and fair in his rulings and exhibited no tendency whatever to railroad matters through the Assembly. What is more while maintaining the dignity of his high position he kept the Assembly in happy mood by his genial yet always courteous wit. In our judgment he plainly erred when he ruled that the writer was out of order in raising the question whether a signer of the "Auburn Affirmation"—an Affirmation which was an attack on a deliverance of previous Assemblies to the effect that the Virgin Birth of our LORD and four other verities of the Christian faith are essential doctrines of the WORD OF GOD and our Standards—is a proper person to be the editor of the "official magazine" of the Church. But apart from that ruling we have nothing but praise for the manner in which he presided over the Assembly.

In recent years those who have been elected Moderator of the General Assembly have manifested a disposition to look upon themselves as the official spokesman of the Church until their successor is elected. There is no warrant, however, in the Standards of the Presbyterian Church for any Moderator taking himself so seriously. The Assembly having adjourned DR. KERR's work as Moderator is ended except as the General Assembly itself has assigned certain duties to him. His utterances during the coming year will carry no more weight than they did during the year that preceded his election as Moderator, that is to say they will carry only such weight as attaches to the words of a man of his ability and wisdom. This is not to minimize beforehand what he may say—DR. KERR is admittedly a man of conspicuous gifts—but it is to say that his election as Moderator has not made him a sort of Presbyterian Archbishop and hence that he has no more right to speak "officially" for the Presbyterian Church than has any other Presbyterian Minister or elder. There can be no difference of opinion at this point between well-instructed Presbyterians.

An Explanatory Statement

WE apologize to our subscribers for the delay in getting out this issue of CHRISTIANITY TODAY even though this delay has been due to circumstances be-

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