

# The Church, The People, and the Age

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## *Analysis and Summary*

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10: Strength in the Face of Death

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**CHRISTIANITY AND OUR TIMES**

WHEN we are asked why it is that there are so many persons who are indifferent to the claims of the Church, no doubt the safest answer to give is that it is for reasons best known to themselves. It seems, however, only a voluntary humility to profess to be ignorant of the fundamental basis of this indifference; an indifference, let it be well borne in mind, which is in no sense "modern," but has characterized ever greater numbers as we go back in the history of the Church to the very beginning. It lies in a weak sense of sin and the natural unconcern of men who do not feel themselves sinners with respect to salvation from sin. For Christianity ad-

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dresses itself only to sinners. Its Founder himself declared that he did not come to call the righteous but sinners; and its chief expounder declared with energetic emphasis that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. When Sir Oliver Lodge announces, in words the truth of which is sufficiently avouched by the chorus of approval with which they have been greeted by those presumed spoken of, that "as a matter of fact the higher man of to-day is not worrying about his sins at all, still less about their punishment," he has uncovered the whole explanation of the current indifference to Christianity. He might have extended his remark, indeed, to cover the lower as well as the higher man, of other days as well as this: there have always been men in sufficient abundance, both higher and lower, who have not bothered themselves about their sins. The open secret of the indifference of men of all classes in all ages to Christianity, so far as that indifference has existed, lies in the indifference of men to sin, and their consequent indifference to salvation from sin. Christianity makes no appeal to men who do not feel the burden of sin. ✓

And here we have already exposed the reason why no Christian Church can take up the position recommended to it on the strength of a declaration attributed to Abraham Lincoln. This declaration is to the effect that a simple requirement of love to God and our neighbor constitutes a sufficient foundation for a church, and the churches would profit by making the profession of such love, or of the wish or purpose to cherish such love, their sole qualification for membership. The moment a church took up such a position, however, it would cease to be a Christian Church: the core of Christianity is X

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its provision for salvation from sin. No doubt by the adoption of such a platform many would be recovered to the Church who now stand aloof from it. But this would be not because the world had been brought into the Church, but because the Church had been merged into the world. The offense of Christianity has always been the cross; as of old, so still to-day, Christ crucified is to Jews a stumbling-block and to Greeks foolishness. It would be easy to remove the offense by abolishing the cross. But that would be to abolish Christianity. Christianity is the cross; and he who makes the cross of Christ of none effect eviscerates Christianity. What Christianity brings to the world is not the bare command to love God and our neighbor. The world needs no such command; nature itself teaches the duty. What the world needs is the power to perform this duty, with respect to which it is impotent. And this power Christianity brings it in the redemption of the Son of God and the renewal of the Holy Ghost. Christianity is not merely a program of conduct: it is the power of a new life.

It is a matter of complete indifference how much debated the constitutive doctrines of Christianity are, or how "controversial" they may be. Everything important is debated, and everything that is precious will certainly be dragged into controversy. If we are to hold to nothing that is questioned, we shall hold to nothing at all: we shall be as the beasts which are beyond good and evil. The very "brief statement" which is proposed as a sufficient creed bristles with questions which are sharply debated and are in the highest degree controversial. If any one thinks it does not, let him ask Friedrich Nietzsche, or if that seems going too far

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afield, even J. M. E. McTaggart; or let him ask merely the man in the street whom he may haply find in some doubt whether it is better to do righteousness or to "do" his neighbor. What is important with respect to the doctrines which we lay at the basis of our church life and make the animating principles of our church organizations, is not that they shall be incapable of being debated and cannot raise "controversial" questions, but that they are sound, "wholesome," for the soul's health, the indispensable foundations for a life of service here to the God whose very name is holy and of communion with him and of rejoicing in him forever. Of course, they must be true. But that does not mean that they must be nothing but rational axioms which are intrinsically incapable of being denied, or ethical commonplaces to which all moral beings must assent, however far they may be from obeying them. They may—or, rather, they must—embody the great historical occurrences in which the God of grace has intervened in the life of sinful men for the purpose of redeeming men from their sins and restoring in their dead hearts the love of God and of their neighbor.

Since these great historical verities are constitutive of Christianity, wherever they are rejected or neglected Christianity has ceased to exist. This used to be well understood and candidly acknowledged. When a David Friedrich Strauss, for example, had drifted away from these great historical verities and sought the support of his religious life elsewhere, he asked himself straightforwardly, "Are we still Christians," and frankly answered, "No." Nowadays this seems to be all changed. Men cheerfully abandon the whole substance of Christianity, but will hardly be persuaded to surrender the

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name. Thus, Rudolf Eucken asks, "Can we still be Christians?" and answers with emphasis, Of course we can; . . . providing only that by Christianity we do not mean—Christianity. Thus also Ernst Troeltsch declares himself still a Christian (a "free Christian"), though his "Christianity" has been so "refashioned" that it has become nothing more than an "immanent theism," the quintessential extract of the religious development of mankind, still holding to the name of Jesus only because it needs a rallying point for its worship and a name to conjure with. It is no doubt a tribute to the significance of Christianity in the world that men who are quite out of harmony with it should manifest such reluctance to surrender the name. But it certainly is very misleading to insist on calling by this name, which should have a definite content, the various congeries of notions each several man has picked up from the surface of the stream of modern thought as it flows by him and wishes to substitute for the thing itself to which the name really belongs as the substance of his religion.

If the term "Christianity" is to be as fluid as this, it has become in the strictest sense of the words an empty name. It no longer has any content of its own. It has become a purely formal designation for whatever may chance, in any age or company, to be thought the sum of the conclusions commended by the science, philosophy, or scholarship of the day. This is what it really comes to when it is demanded, as it so frequently is, that theology shall be kept in harmony with what are for the moment called "the assured results" of science, philosophy, and scholarship. The thing is, of course, impossible. Science, philosophy, scholarship, represent not stable but constantly changing entities. And noth-

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ing is more certain than that the theology which is in close harmony with the science, philosophy, and scholarship of to-day will be much out of harmony with the science, philosophy, and scholarship of to-morrow. <sup>when we will get to a new theology</sup> A theology which is to be kept in harmony with a growing science and philosophy and scholarship, breaking their way onward by a process of trial and correction, must be a veritable nose of wax which can be twisted in any direction as it may serve our temporary purpose. If it be asked, therefore, in what way "the fundamental theology of the Church" "is to be related to the literary, scientific, and philosophical certainties of our time," the answer certainly cannot be that it is to be subordinated to them and made their slave, tremblingly following their every variation as they zigzag their devious way onward toward the certainties, not "of our time," but of all time. Theology is itself a science, with its own proper object, method and content: it has its own certainties to contribute to the sum of ascertained truth; and it dare not do other than place these certainties, established by their own appropriate evidence, by the side of any other certainties which may exist, as equally entitled with the best attested of them all to the acceptance of men. And if seeming inconsistencies appear, then there is nothing for it but patiently to await the coming of the better day when trial and correction have done their perfect work and the unity of all truth shall be vindicated by its realized harmony.

By "the fundamental theology of the Church" is meant especially the Church's confession of that series of the redemptive acts of God, by which he has supernaturally intervened in human history for the salvation of sinful man, as interpreted and given their full mean-



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ing in the revelation which he has made to his people in time past at sundry times and in divers manners through his servants the prophets, and in these last times in his Son speaking through the apostles whom he appointed as his representatives in founding his Church. This is not a mass of cunningly devised fables, but the substance of saving truth. And no message can be effective for the salvation of a lost world which does not stand for and teach in the face of all hesitation and unbelief, denial and opposition, those things which constitute the sum-total of this saving truth, as it has been set down for us in Holy Scripture. The message of Christianity concerns, not "the values of human life," but the grace of the saving God in Christ Jesus. And in proportion as the grace of the saving God in Christ Jesus is obscured or passes into the background, in that proportion does Christianity slip from our grasp. Christianity is summed up in the phrase: "God was in Christ, reconciling the world with himself." Where this great confession is contradicted or neglected, there is no Christianity.