

THOUGHTS
ON CHRISTOLOGY

James Drummond

THE ESSEX HALL LECTURE, 1902

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ON
CHRISTOLOGY

BY THE REV.

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE.

THE Lecture published in this little book is the sixth of a series of Lectures dealing with some aspect of religious thought and life from the point of view of thinkers unfettered by subscription to any dogmatic creed or ecclesiastical system.

The first lecture was delivered in 1893, by the Rev. Stopford A. Brooke, who took for his subject 'The development of Theology as illustrated in English Poetry from 1780 to 1830'; the second in 1894, by Mrs. Humphry Ward, on 'Unitarians and the Future'; the third in 1895, by the Rev. J. Estlin Carpenter, on 'The relation of Jesus to his age and our own'; the fourth in 1897, by the Rev. R. A. Armstrong, on 'The significance of the teaching of Jesus'; the fifth in 1899, by the Rev. P. H. Wicksteed, on 'The religion of Time and the religion of Eternity, a study of certain relations between Medieval and Modern Thought.'

London, *July*, 1902.

SOME THOUGHTS ON
CHRISTOLOGY.

THE Essex Hall Lecture, if I have not wholly misconceived its object, is not intended to be the manifesto of a party, but the free utterance of the lecturer on some religious subject of general interest. Theology has been so much upon the move in recent years, and so many conclusions have been reached by competent scholars which are widely separated from the old orthodoxy, that the tone of theological discussion has lost its harshness, and men are slowly becoming accustomed to the thought that religious dogmas are just as open to unrestricted investigation as questions of science or history. Nevertheless, owing to

the sectarian divisions of England, and the dogmatic obligations which, at least ostensibly, rest upon most churches, it is still far too common to assume that no one can speak purely from his own thought and conviction, or avoid being the advocate of obligatory conclusions. But by an audience assembled in this Hall, it must be clearly understood and even expected that the lecturer who may address them will be bound by no party ties, but will have pursued his investigations with no aim but truth, and with no side-glances at the requirements or the approbation of a sect. In assuming this attitude, however, we do not claim an entire exemption from bias and prejudice, to which human nature is so liable, but only that, recognising this liability, we earnestly endeavour to guard ourselves against it, and in every investigation to follow with reverent simplicity the leading of evidence.

The subject which is to engage our

attention at present may be expressed by the question, 'What think ye of Christ?' To discuss with any approach to adequacy the whole doctrine of the person of Christ would carry us far beyond the limits of a lecture, and the following suggestions must therefore be addressed to a limited class of minds. There are two opposite positions which we must leave out of consideration, not because we are deaf or indifferent to what they say, but because there is no time to do justice to their views, and because construction is more useful than controversy. There are those who stand stiffly by the ecclesiastical dogma of the Incarnation, or the hypostatic union of two natures in one person through the miraculous birth of the God-man from the Virgin, with the resulting *perichoresis* and *communicatio idiomatum*. There are, on the other hand, those in whose minds Jesus occupies no conscious place, who look upon him as the random product or necessary outcome of the million-

fold variations of physical evolution, and who would therefore meet our question with a denial of every form of Christology. But between these two classes there is a large number of persons, not only avowed Unitarians, but scattered through various denominations, and even outside of all the churches, to whom the ecclesiastical dogma has become obsolete, as neither credible in itself nor resting on the basis of primitive Christianity, but in whose religious affections, nevertheless, Jesus Christ fills a large and unique place. Most of these are equally remote from the old Unitarian conception of a divine ambassador, who stood outside the spiritual laws of the world, and was commissioned to reveal certain truths, and give them the stamp of a miraculous authority. This hypothesis has come to seem cold and artificial, as well as defective in convincing evidence. There is in many minds an uneasy, groping after a view richer in spiritual warmth and life-giving power,

while at the same time fully recognising the results of scientific and critical inquiry. It is to minds in this state that the present lecture is intended to afford some little help, and this fact must be taken into account if some statements are put forward as accepted beliefs which men in a different frame of mind may regard as mere assumptions, but which the persons addressed have received as the results of careful and impartial investigation.

First, then, we must endeavour to gain some clear conception of the basis on which our conclusion must rest. It is the business of the theologian to throw into intellectual form the raw material of spiritual experience and thought. This is true, whatever be the assumed foundations of belief. If, with the older Protestants, we say that the Bible, and the Bible alone, contains an infallible revelation, still it is admitted that the Bible presents no systematic creed, and that uninspired intellect must step in, and gather

together its scattered phrases and statements, and subject them to critical interpretation. That this process leads to very insecure results, and the infallibility of the Bible offers no guarantee against the fallibility of man, is abundantly proved by the history of exegesis. It is not, therefore, without reason that the Catholic steps in and says that you have no security till you accept the Bible as interpreted through the infallible tradition of the Church. But even here, as is shown by the history of doctrines, the traditional faith was in a somewhat chaotic condition till it was wrought into shape by centuries of thought and discussion, and, as a rule, it was only when conflict became intolerable that the Church endeavoured, by a dogmatic pronouncement, to lull the storms of controversy. And even now there is room for the Catholic theologian to arrange and subordinate, and bring into their rational connections, the dogmas of his Church ; and great systematic treatises, like that of

Thomas Aquinas, however highly valued, have no binding authority. The theologian, then, whatever may be his basis, cannot claim to be anything more than the fallible interpreter of fundamental truth.

Hence arises our own problem,—where are we to find the sources of fundamental truth in regard to the person of Christ ? In rejecting the dogma of the Incarnation or hypostatic union, we have rejected the authority of the Church, but only to a very limited extent that of the Bible ; and we might fall back upon the old barren discussion of proof texts. But the infallibility of the Bible has passed from our belief through the slow corrosion of scientific knowledge and historical criticism ; and, if we would retain our Christianity at all, we must frankly surrender this position, and retreat to another stronghold of faith, which may perhaps be found to retain what is essentially true in both the Catholic and the Protestant theories, while rejecting what

seems to be proved error. But is there such a stronghold—one that can stand unharmed amid the war of creeds and the assaults of doubt? There is. It is called the Christian consciousness,—a phrase useful from its conciseness, but perhaps not always very clearly conceived. It serves to express the peculiar form and quality of the religious spirit which is produced by Christianity. We must refer to it at present only in general terms. There is a graciousness and purity of soul, a tender regard for others, a self-forgetfulness of love, a glad and trustful acceptance of the divine will, a sense of intimate communion with God, a felt relationship with Christ, which we recognise as specifically Christian. When we meet a man in whom these traits are evident, we say, Behold a Christian indeed, in whom there is no guile; and we do not ask what sect he belongs to, or what creed he professes. The seal of divine sonship is on his brow, and, be he orthodox or heretic,

he is above both, and belongs to the fellowship of saints. At the root of this life, there are profound convictions; convictions, however, which may be held implicitly and never become clear objects of conscious thought, and by which, accordingly, a man with little learning and reflection may live and find salvation. It is the duty of the theologian to interpret these convictions, and draw forth their implicit contents into explicit thought, and so turn them into truths communicable to the understanding of others. This intellectual process is liable to two kinds of error. First, the Christian consciousness which it seeks to interpret may be only partially developed, or may be mingled with accretions from impure sources, and then the interpretation must necessarily share in the imperfection of that which is submitted to its scrutiny. Secondly, the forms in which the intellect presents spiritual truth are necessarily affected by the entire intellectual equipment of any given time, and,

therefore, either change with the general advance of culture and thought, or falling out of relation with it become distasteful, and cease to be vehicles of religious power, These two sources of error, explain the existence and need of a progressive theology. The Christian spirit, working as a hidden force in the souls of men, strives towards the realisation of its own fulness, and gradually casts off those elements which have no organic union with it; and the intellect, ever expanding in its knowledge of the universe, and in its power of coherent thought, wakens from its childish dreams, and works in the maturity of its manhood.

The second of these sources of error requires special watchfulness at the present day; for it has become customary to appeal to Christian experience as a certain proof of the traditional dogma, which renders it practically independent of the historical basis of Christianity. If the philosophy of any given time must affect the general tendency

of theological thought, much more must the interpretation of individual experience tend to run in the moulds of dogma which have been shaped in the mind from childhood. No doubt the piety of some ancient Roman could have told how Minerva or Diana had helped him in his distress. The devout Catholic is deeply moved by the sacrifice of the Mass, and finds in his exalted emotion an evidence of the reality of transubstantiation. And so the evangelical Christian, conscious of the life-giving power of Christ in his heart, leaps to the conclusion that the definition of the Council of Chalcedon is thereby confirmed, and that, whatever historical criticism may do, the dogma of the incarnation is rendered certain. But when we reflect, it seems obvious that no subjective experience can prove the reality of a far distant historical event; and one who will cast an impartial look beyond the enclosure of his own inherited thought, perceives that amid diversity of doctrine there

is a substantial identity of experience. As we pierce down to the deepest seats of Christian faith and piety, we become more clearly aware of a unity of spirit, which is the creator rather than the creature of dogma, and requires for its full expression something larger and more comprehensive than the symbols of any sect. The anathemas of Councils and the denunciations of controversialists do not in reality mark the separation between the devout and the profane; and, accordingly, what we have to attempt is to reach the elementary impressions and convictions which are antecedent to dogma, and then, so far as we are able, to express these in a form of doctrine which is suitable to the present state of thought and knowledge.

But in thus endeavouring to escape from the second source of error, we are in danger of becoming involved in the first. We can interpret the Christian spirit only through its revelation in ourselves, and we thus

become the victims of what is called mere subjective opinion, which may rest on a very limited basis of Christian experience. This disadvantage, however, cannot be altogether overcome by any system of authoritative dogma. No belief has any vitality which is without a spiritual root in ourselves; and, whatever may be our intellectual confession of faith, our operative convictions are only those which link themselves to our inward needs and experiences. A half truth which has been accepted with the devout recognition of our own souls, is worth more than a whole truth which is thrust from the outside upon our puzzled intellect, and meets with no inward response; and, whatever else we may say, it forms for the time being our real creed. Nevertheless, we may take some precautions against this source of error; and, indeed, those who are not bound by dogma ought to be less liable to it than others. Those who are enclosed within a system, on which they suppose salvation to

depend, cannot look with sympathetic mind beyond their own enclosure; but shut themselves up within their narrow bounds, and, sitting in the seat of the scornful, misinterpret all phases of the religious life different from their own. But the only way to escape from our own narrowness of view, is to cultivate a sympathetic insight into phases of the religious life different from our own, and, through a constantly enlarging fellowship, approach more nearly the fulness of the Christian spirit. Love is the great discerner of hearts, and we are so constituted that through Love the religious experience of others becomes our own; or, at least, the latent experience in ourselves is so quickened by the richer and more powerful experience of others, that it springs into clear consciousness, and presents itself to thought as a fresh element in our spiritual life. In our investigation, therefore, we must look, not only for the most elementary, but for the most universal form of the Christian

consciousness; and we must lay our own hearts open to the kindling action of souls more finely endowed than our own.

In seeking thus to understand and interpret our own experience through the experience of others we naturally turn in the first instance to the primitive society of Christians. If the New Testament cannot furnish us with a number of little oracles, it can show us in broad and clear lines what impression Jesus of Nazareth made upon the first disciples. In their transition, as it seemed to themselves, from darkness to light, not only was their religious experience peculiarly vivid, but the elements in it which were new were clearly marked off in their consciousness from their previous state of mind. To Paul, who had from the first been a pious and conscientious man, all things had become new, so deep and vital was the change which Christianity had wrought in him. In order to understand what this means, let us draw forth for distinct appre-

ciation the chief elements in that primitive impression.

It was as a religious teacher that Jesus first attracted public attention. The mass of the people were astonished at his new and authoritative teaching; those who attached themselves to him were spoken of as his 'disciples,' and habitually addressed him as 'teacher'; and he himself regarded preaching and bearing witness to the truth as the special object of his life.¹ But even under this limited aspect it is not sufficient to say that he was a teacher: he was a teacher of a very peculiar kind. The scribes too were teachers; and, in contrast with them, Jesus, we are told, taught as one having authority, and not as the scribes. They avowedly based their instruction on the records of ancient wisdom. They were uninspired men, to whom no word of God came as in the olden time, and by a diligent application of artificial rules they endeavoured

¹ *Mark* i. 38; *John* xviii. 37.

to extract from ancient scriptures the divine light which was wanting in themselves. But Jesus, appealing to the fresh instincts of the multitude, spoke with a commanding power, which stung the conscience and warmed the heart, and made men go home saying, 'We have heard strange things to-day.' This manner of speech, which came irrepressibly from the deep fountains of life within him, seemed to bring back the ancient days when there was an open vision of God, and prophets flung forth their burning words in the name of the eternal Righteousness. Yes, there was once more a prophet in Israel. 'A great prophet was raised up among' them,¹ 'a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people.'² Nor was this a mere transient ebullition of excited feeling. It passed into the permanent belief of Christendom; and a high Catholic authority pronounces that 'Jesus Christ was the

¹ *Luke* vii. 16.

² *Luke* xxiv. 19.

supreme prophet and teacher, who taught us the will of God, and from whose teaching the world has received knowledge of the heavenly Father.’¹ Jesus himself, though a deeper consciousness is ascribed to him, accepted this popular view. ‘A prophet,’ he said, alluding to himself, ‘is not without honour save in his own country,’² and ‘it is not possible for a prophet to perish out of Jerusalem.’³ He felt that a divine message had come straight to his own soul, that there were spiritual things which he had seen and heard, and that he had been sent into the world to bear witness to these things, and summon men to a nobler righteousness and a deeper faith than belonged to the Scribes and Pharisees.

And now we must ask,—What is the relation between Christ and his teaching? Is

¹ *Catech. Rom.*, Pars I., De Art. II. § xi.

² *Mark* vi. 4, *Matt.* xiii. 57, *Luke* iv. 24, *John* iv. 44.

³ *Luke* xiii. 33. For other passages showing the popular and early Christian view see *Matt.* xxi. 11, 46; *John* iv. 19, vi. 14, vii. 40, ix. 17; *Acts* iii. 22 sq., vii. 37.

his doctrine a pure system of truth, which the world, having once received retains, and would retain no less if he who first enunciated it were utterly forgotten? It is necessary to ask this question, because the position implied in it has been actually maintained. Christ bore witness to the truth; but a truth, when once it is discovered and published, becomes common property, and is accepted, not on account of any one’s word, but because it approves itself to the universal reason. An historical interest, no doubt, belongs to the origin and growth of opinion; but this in no way affects the acceptance of a doctrine which rests upon adequate evidence. We should not question the truth of the Copernican astronomy even if we had never heard of Copernicus, or if some ingenious critic had dissolved him into a solar myth. And so, it is said, the truth of Christianity would remain if the very name of Jesus were forgotten, or the whole of the Gospel story were dissipated into a

nebulous mythology. This has the appearance of sound reasoning, and certainly contains a measure of truth ; and yet the general Christian consciousness raises a protest, and declares that a Christianity without Christ is no complete interpretation of its faith. In pronouncing this position unsatisfactory I say nothing derogatory of the men who hold it. They move among Christian ideals, and anticipate the time when the Son shall have delivered up the kingdom to the Father, that God may be all in all. That some men may have an unclouded and immediate perception of the truth promulgated by Christ, that they may have an anointing which abides in them, and have no need that any man should teach them,¹ we have no right to deny. But few of us move in this upper air of complete conviction and undimmed communion, free alike from misgivings and from dogmatism. We are not insensible to the

¹ 1 John ii. 27.

help which a greater soul than our own may render in bringing us now and then to the mount of vision, and breathing the earnest of the Spirit into our hearts. We can recognise a man sent from God, full of grace and truth, and rest joyfully in his higher insight, when our duller minds are unable to rise above the mists of earth, and look into the unveiled glory of the Father's presence.

To the ordinary Christian consciousness, then, Christ and his teaching blend into one indissoluble whole. The Word, the Truth of God which speaks to the soul, has become flesh, and apart from the flesh, from the human personality in which it dwelt and revealed itself in speech and deed, in tone and gesture,—it does not, indeed, become dumb ; but it is diminished in power and contracted in range. The teaching is only a partial expression of the spirit that made its tabernacle within ; and that spirit breathes into precept and parable, and fills them

with an enthralling power, while in imagination we sit at the feet of the teacher, and catch the tones of faith and love with which he spoke. We receive an impression of his personality from what he did and suffered, as well as from what he taught; and we import the moral reverence awakened by this impression into all his words of wisdom, and so communicate to them a living and inspiring energy which can never belong to a dead deposit of formal doctrine. Accordingly, if you removed the image of Christ from the heart of Christendom, even if you retained a statement of the truth which he taught, you would not only create a sense of sorrowing bereavement, but you would greatly weaken, and might even shatter, its moral and spiritual ideal.

Again, there is an immense difference between scientific and spiritual truth. Scientific truth is addressed wholly to the intellect, and can be adequately conveyed in the form of a proposition; and when that pro-

position is established by satisfactory proof, it may be transmitted from generation to generation in various text-books, and will be received by all competent students on the sole ground that they recognise the sufficiency of its evidence. To such a truth, it really makes no difference who first discovered it; its character and reception are in no way affected by our knowledge of this historical circumstance, and our interest in the discoverer is purely antiquarian. But spiritual truth is neither understood nor received solely through an intellectual process. It moves amidst ideas which are not apprehensible by the senses and the logical faculty; and till these ideas have come within the range of our inward experience, the very words in which spiritual truth is expressed must remain unintelligible. If we say, 'He that abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him,'¹ can a hard, worldly, and selfish man understand this proposition,

¹ *John* iv. 16.

and find the evidence for it in a text-book? He does not know what Christian love means, for it has never dawned upon his consciousness, and he has no interior sense of the abiding God. Or if we say, that the Fatherhood of God is the great discovery of Christianity, can this be understood like a truth in astronomy or biology? Was there not a time, when it flashed with all its vast meaning into the soul of Christ, and in the rapture of this vision he rejoiced and gave thanks that to the filial heart had been revealed what was hidden from the wise and prudent?¹ These things are spiritually discerned, and text-books of theology will not create the perception of that which transcends the sphere of the senses and the intellect. We can know the Father only through the spirit of the Son dwelling in our hearts by faith. Till that spirit discloses itself within, 'crying Abba, Father,' we are without the organ of apprehension

¹ *Matt. xi. 25; Luke x. 21 sq.*

to which the doctrine of the Divine Fatherhood appeals; and the deeper and truer the representation of it, the more will it appear 'foolishness' to us. Hence it is that Christian truth is retained in the world, not by dead propositions, but by living persons in whom it dwells, and that he who first announced it remains its permanent revealer through the sympathetic infusion of his own spirit into the hearts of his disciples. But, if it be said that at least, when once the sun of truth has risen in the soul, we are ever after independent of him who first caused the light to shine, it may be so with some pure souls who have no night, and on whom the clouds never fall; but most of us require renewal, and cling to some stronger soul as we pass through the dark valley or feel our way amid the mountain mists, and many a time we have to see by another's light; and in whom shall we find such full assurance of faith as in him who stands in the centre of the great company of saints, and whose

light, streaming from the opened heavens, is reflected in every face?

Will, then, our sense of permanent relation to him be satisfied if we recognise in him an example, to whom we may continually look for guidance, and by reference to whom we may correct and stimulate our own moral ideal? The force of his example was recognised in the earliest age, as we learn from many allusions to it in the New Testament;¹ and his challenge to a nobler righteousness has never faded from the minds of men. But, when we ask in what sense he is an example, it at once becomes clear that his outward life can be no model for the vast majority of his disciples. The martyr might imitate his bearing under persecution, and the missionary might to some extent copy the method of his teaching. But the mass of

¹ *Matt.* xx. 28; *John* xiii. 15, 34, xv. 12; *Rom.* xv. 3; *1 Cor.* xi. 1; *2 Cor.* viii. 9; *Eph.* v. 2; *Phil.* ii. 5; *Col.* iii. 13; *1 Tim.* vi. 13; *1 Peter* ii. 21, iii. 17 sq.; *1 John* ii. 6, iii. 3, 7, 16, iv. 17.

mankind are not called either to martyrdom or to missionary enterprise; and the outward circumstances, and with these the duties, of their lives are totally different from those of Jesus. The manufacturer and the merchant, the student and the statesman, the labourer and the artizan, would look in vain to him for the details of their work; and if they feel, as many do feel, that he is nevertheless an example even to them, they must refer, not to certain actions which they might servilely copy, but to great principles of conduct which are universally applicable. These Jesus illustrated on a field of life remote from ours, and each disciple must give them a fresh application to his own particular case. Jesus, therefore, is not so much a model, which we are to look at and copy, as a spirit of life which may diffuse itself, like a purifying atmosphere, through every variety of human vocation.

Having reached this point, we can go

farther, and say with Paul that Christ is 'a quickening spirit,' dwelling in the heart by faith; a force of inward life, which nurtures with holy love the spiritual roots of our being. The influence which one soul exerts over another is profoundly mysterious. But though we cannot trace the path of the spirit, it is a matter of daily experience. Not only do we influence one another through word and deed; but how much of our mental treasure consists of reverence for the departed, whose images dwell mysteriously within, and often pour balm upon our sorrows, or brace us up for some conflict of duty. And that which father or mother, or brother or sister, or friend or teacher, of long ago, may be to the individual—messengers between the visible and the invisible—that Christ is to his Church. Individuals may have their preferences in the descending hierarchy of souls, and, as Catholics have their favourite saints, so it may be, and often is, with others; but the influence of

these inferior saints is distributed and partial, according as some special feature in their character proves to be a kindred centre of attraction. Christ alone is the universal spirit to whom all Christians look, and whose life, whether dimly or clearly recognised, pulsates through the whole body, transforming and sanctifying men according to the measure of their faith.

But here an objection may be raised, that we are falling into the error, already alluded to, of misinterpreting our experience, and that what we seem to receive through the mediation of Christ comes in reality straight from the Father of our spirits. That there is a direct communion between the soul and God, no Christian would deny; but it is also true that God speaks to us indirectly through the order and beauty of Nature, and has placed men in such spiritual relations with one another that one soul is often the organ of divine communication to another, and transmits to a wide circle the

life which has been intrusted to itself. Now, it seems perfectly clear from the writings of the New Testament, that the earliest disciples were conscious that Christ had exercised this sort of influence over them in such a high degree that their inward life had been entirely changed, and a power wholly new to their experience had taken possession of them, placing an ideal before their will and a fulness of love within their hearts which seemed to them to be an indwelling of the spirit of life in Christ. This was a personal power; in part, no doubt, the result of his teaching, but going far beyond his teaching—a richness and exaltation of life, of which teaching can be only a very partial expression. It has often been pointed out, perhaps with a good deal of exaggeration, that Christ's doctrine was not very original; and that many parallels to it can be found elsewhere, and it is conceivable that, if Christianity were nothing but a scheme of doctrines, these might be gathered together from dif-

ferent sources, and an eclectic system of truths might be the basis of our religion. But with the first disciples, it was far otherwise. While their thought slowly changed, and retained the clinging shreds of ancient error, their inward life was swept by a new spirit, the full results of which in thought and action could not be at once foreseen, and through the energy of love they drew into their hearts that great redeeming soul, which changed them into children of God, and transfigured the universe into a vesture of Divine thought.

Now this experience has never died out of the Christian Church. There may be many peaceful souls in whom it has little vividness, because they cannot share the early consciousness of sharp contrast between the old and the new; but there are numbers to whom it still comes as a sudden awakening, filling them with a new order of emotion, and changing their ideal of life. It may be that some lesser soul has brought

them to the feet of Christ, and for a period they may nourish the roots of their spiritual life chiefly through the teachings of this secondary agent; but even then, it is the spirit of Christ that speaks to them in these borrowed tones, and as with lapse of time these tones sink into silence, and cease to be a living inspiration, the large and balanced life that beats in the heart of Christendom remains, concentrated now in that grand figure which stands supreme over the ages, while many wise and good, who shone brilliantly for their brief hour, have sunk away in the dimness of retreating time. That this kind of experience depends in part on the character of the soul that feels it is perfectly true. Without a sympathetic response and a power of spiritual interpretation, no soul can be influenced even by Christ. No man can come to him unless the Father who sent him plant the same spirit within, so that spirit meets spirit with the glow of conscious recognition, and that which was little more

than a sleeping potentiality springs into the fulness of waking life. But though there must be this preparedness of heart, the experience rests on an historical foundation, and is continually renewed and purified by resort to those historical sources without which we should know nothing of Jesus, and on which we must always depend for correcting our impressions and enlarging our apprehension of his character and place in the religions of the world.

And now we come to an experience which, however numerous may be the exceptions, is certainly characteristic of Christianity as a whole. Christ has brought the love of God closer to human consciousness, and changed into a living sense of personal communion that large and vague belief with which men endeavoured to look into the infinite abyss of being, and adored the unseen Power whom none can find out unto perfection. It is indeed true that the consciousness of intimate communion with God

is not limited to Christianity. To go no further afield, it finds clear and beautiful expression in certain passages of the Old Testament. But this deep and spiritual piety was so rare, that the first Christians seemed to themselves to have been lifted into a new divine atmosphere, and to be living encompassed by a spirit of heavenly love, such as they had not conceived in their pre-Christian state. This experience was connected with an awakened sense of sin; and that Divine Love which had spoken to their hearts in Christ, made them feel at once how alienated they had been from the life of God, and yet how close to them was God's love, forgiving all the past, and beseeching them to come and be reconciled, and live as his redeemed children. Love, they perceived, was of God; and the love which in Christ had filled their hearts with wonder and joy had its source in God, and was indeed the Spirit of God manifesting itself in man, and pleading through

human lips and human hands. And still this experience lives; men ready to despair under the sense of sin and estrangement from God, feel in Christ the touch of Divine Grace, and become conscious that they are received into a communion with God which is the beginning of spiritual life, and the earnest of final victory.

Such, then, are the facts of Christian consciousness on which our Christology must be founded. The ecclesiastical dogma, although it owes its form largely to Greek philosophy, is a genuine attempt to interpret these experiences, and especially to draw forth and formulate the full contents of that which has been last mentioned; and, indeed, perhaps its chief fault has been that it has tried to drag these mysterious relations, so clear to consciousness, but so dim to reason, into the sharp light of rational statement, and so ultimately sacrificed the spirit to the form, and doomed lovers of Christ to destruction because they could not accept a

congeries of arid and self-contradictory propositions. We must always remember, that the experience is fundamental, the interpretation is secondary, and is resorted to in order to give precision to our thought, and so satisfy an intellectual demand. But as Nature, which is permanent, receives an interpretation which varies with increasing knowledge, so the interpretation of the enduring spirit of Christianity must receive modification as its essential contents are more clearly apprehended, and the system of knowledge in which it must find its place is changed and enlarged. In framing our doctrine, we may resort to the most ancient terms, which expressed the feelings of the newly-awakened soul, and see what meaning they retain for ourselves. Even for the earliest believers these terms had not always the same connotation, and different types of doctrine are sufficiently apparent within the borders of the New Testament itself; and as, in spite of the originality which lifted

them into a new meaning, they were necessarily coloured by the prevalent thought of the time, it cannot surprise us if some of the associated ideas have become obsolete for us. Our endeavour must be to draw forth the essential meaning which abides as the permanent possession of a spiritual faith.

First, then, Jesus was a man in the full and complete sense of that word. That he was 'a man approved of God' is represented as the earliest description of him in Christian preaching;¹ and that he was truly man, with all the attributes of man except sin, is laid down with the utmost distinctness in the ecclesiastical definitions. That this should ever have been necessary would seem strange, were we not familiar with the wild speculations of the early centuries. The first heresy in regard to the person of Christ was a denial of his humanity. He was conceived as a heavenly being, who had simply put on the temporary

¹ *Acts* ii. 22.

semblance of our nature in order to perform the work of redemption; and, even among those who wished to be orthodox, opinions arose which, while admitting the reality of Christ's body, represented him as more or less defective on the human side. The Church, therefore, asserted the completeness of his humanity in the most absolute way, and would not admit that this was in any degree impaired by the hypostatic union. But it was impossible strictly to maintain this position; for a man who was united with God in a wholly miraculous and exceptional manner, and became with him a single person, virtually ceased to be man; and the later doctrine of the intercommunication of properties rendered a real human experience impossible, a human consciousness filled with Divine omniscience being in truth no longer human. Hence in popular belief Christ's humanity has become practically merged in his deity, and the general attitude towards him is that of an

unacknowledged Docetism. He is placed in a class absolutely by himself, so that instead of illustrating the spiritual laws of life which connect man with God, he is a solitary figure in the universe, and simply shows us what man can never be. Hence it has become necessary to reaffirm the doctrine of his true and complete humanity, and to deny whatever nullifies or obscures that doctrine.

According to the oldest Christian confession, the first formal statement of a distinctive faith, Jesus was the Christ; and, according to *Acts*, Peter taught that he was Christ, not through any peculiarity in his nature, but because God had made him so.¹ The term itself was supposed to be sufficiently understood; and however the idea which it conveyed may have been cleared from the coarsest elements of the popular messianic conception, it is undeniable that it included beliefs and expectations which history has not confirmed. These we must

¹ *Acts* ii. 36, Χριστὸν ἐποίησεν ὁ θεός.

necessarily discard, not only as belonging to an unspiritual realm of apocalyptic fancies, but because there is no warrant for postponing their realisation to some distant and unknown future. Nevertheless the term Christ has not dwindled for us into a mere proper name. It tells us, through a figure, that Jesus was providentially set apart and consecrated for the fulfilment of a special work: 'God anointed him with holy spirit and power.'¹ Again, the word serves as a link in the historical development of religion, reminding us that Christianity, though it made all things new, had its spiritual roots in a remote past. Although we must relinquish the old conception of prophecy as a literal prediction of precise events, we must nevertheless recognise in the greatest teachers of Israel a forward look towards a nobler righteousness, and, in a large sense, we may say that Christ fulfilled the highest aspirations of his people, and embodied a

¹ *Acts* x. 38.

providential idea which had been slowly unfolding itself from its rude beginnings in Patriarchal times. Jesus, as the Christ, stands on the confines of two ages, and belongs to both, drawing to a focus in himself the inspiration of Lawgiver, Psalmist, and Prophet, and being the first-born in that great company of brethren in whom the life of the spirit, ceasing to be Jewish, was to become universal. And this leads to one other thought. Jesus, as the Christ, was the founder of a kingdom of God; and that kingdom, as he conceived it, is spiritual,—the reign of God in the soul of man. Hence the anointing was not conceived as limited to himself. God, it was said, 'anointed us, . . . and gave us the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts,'¹ and it is this anointing with the Spirit that brings men into fellowship with Christ, the Anointed one, who would enthroned God in the purified palace of every soul of man.

¹ *2 Cor.* i. 21 sq. See also *1 John* ii. 20, 27.

It is from this point of view that he is spoken of as the Saviour. Imaginations more or less mythological, and therefore perishable, may have mingled with the conception of messianic salvation; but nevertheless the idea of salvation from sin is fundamental in the New Testament.¹ We do not, therefore, depart from the central meaning of the term when we drop the temporary elements, and concentrate our attention on that spiritual change which is wrought in men by the appeal of his love and the kindling power of his life. There are multitudes who are conscious that the energy of evil in them has been broken by Christ, and who have a profound faith that the prevalence of his spirit is the only agency that can redeem society; and if many refrain from carelessly uttering the term as a mere proper name, and reverently

¹ See *Matt.* i. 21, *Luke* xix. 10, *Acts* iii. 26, 2 *Cor.* vii. 10, *Philip.* ii. 12, *Titus* iii. 5, besides numerous passages where the sinful are excluded from the kingdom of God.

reserve it for appropriate occasions, there is no other title which in their private meditations they use with such deep feeling of gratitude and love.

It may have been as head of the Messianic Kingdom that Jesus was described as 'Lord.' This term is of such frequent occurrence in the New Testament that it is needless to enumerate the passages. Its precise signification is nowhere defined; but its use was tantamount to an acknowledgment of Christian discipleship. As the correlative of 'Lord' is 'slave,' disciples are spoken of as slaves of Christ; and Paul declares that no man can say 'Jesus is Lord' but in the Holy Spirit,¹ and looks forward to the time when every tongue shall confess that 'Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.'² The use of this term in our own time has been strongly objected to on two grounds: that it is impossible for us to attach to it

¹ *1 Cor.* xii. 3. ² *Philip.* ii. 11.

its original signification ; and that it is quite illegitimate within the realm of moral relations, where reverence for the higher soul does not imply servility, or a surrender of our own conscience to the keeping of another. Now, it may be true that the term was at first associated with some temporary Messianic expectations ;¹ but its fundamental idea was clearly that of spiritual leadership, a leadership which, instead of enslaving, redeemed. The word was sometimes employed simply as a title of respect ;² and the relation of Lord and slave within the spiritual sphere can only have denoted, through a figure, a supreme sense of reverence and indebtedness, for 'liberty' is a pass-word of the Gospel. 'If the Son shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed ;'³ 'where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty ;'⁴ 'ye did not receive the spirit of slavery ;'⁵ 'thou art no longer a slave, but

¹ See especially 1 *Thes.* iv. 16. ² *John* iv. 11, 15, 19, xii. 21, in the Greek. ³ *John* viii. 36. ⁴ 2 *Cor.* iii. 17. ⁵ *Rom.* viii. 15.

a son.'¹ These and similar expressions are characteristic of the Gospel as presented to us in the New Testament. It seems to me, then, that, while we ought not to use the title 'Lord' as an empty proper name, we may, on fitting occasions, employ it to express our profound reverence for Christ's leadership, and our desire to be his servants, not in the sense of rendering an unintelligent obedience to formal precepts, but of submitting our heart and soul, our thoughts, aspirations and resolves to that transcendent spirit of holy and self-sacrificing love, which he manifested in the world, and which alone is eternal life. To us, as to Paul, 'the Lord is the Spirit ;'² and it is within, where love answers love, and veneration adores an ideal perfection, that he exercises his sway.

We come lastly to the term which is richest and deepest in significance, 'the Son of God.' This title is regularly applied

Gal. iv. 7. ² 2 *Cor.* iii. 17.

to the historical man, Jesus, who walked and taught in Palestine. According to Paul the Son of God was 'sprung from the seed of David according to the flesh;'¹ and although there are a few passages which might possibly refer to a pre-existent being who, prior to the incarnation, was perfectly distinct from Jesus, there is none, unless the Epistle to the Hebrews furnish an exception, which requires this interpretation. The offence of Christianity consisted in the claim that a real man was in any real sense the Son of God; and the distinction generally made, which represents Jesus as the Son of God in a totally different sense from that in which the term is applied to other men, not only renders the whole Christian argument incoherent, but rests on the same deep-seated unbelief which led the Jews to charge Christ with blasphemy. For if the word 'son' has a completely different meaning when applied to Christ and to other

¹ *Rom. i. 3.*

men, it is impossible to infer our sonship from his, and if we pretend to do so, we are simply using a trick of words, while at the same time we are rejecting an exalted doctrine of primitive Christianity. Men were called to be 'a temple of the living God,' and by virtue of this Divine indwelling to be his sons and daughters.¹ If it is said that Jesus was 'the only-begotten,' or rather 'the only' or 'unique' Son,² it is clear that by this epithet the writer intends to denote pre-eminence; for he has already told us that as many as have received the Word of God 'have been begotten out of God.'³ He, therefore, in whom that Word or Thought of God received its supreme manifestation stood alone and unique in his sonship, though still 'the first-born among many brothers.'⁴ This Divine relationship, resulting in immediate and spiritual worship, and in the consciousness of an

¹ *2 Cor. vi. 16-18.* ² *John i. 18,* where the reading is doubtful, *iii. 16.* ³ *John i. 12, 13.* ⁴ *Rom. viii. 29.*

ever-present holiness, and of a heavenly love welling up in the heart and proclaiming itself the eternal life, was the great and characteristic revelation of Christianity. Man was now seen to be 'the image and glory of God.'¹ The disciples knew themselves as a temple of God, and the Spirit of God dwelt in them.² Their body, so often despised, was an awful and wondrous shrine, a temple of the Holy Spirit.³ They were partakers of the Divine nature.⁴ Their fellowship was with the Father.⁵ They had been begotten out of God, and could not sin.⁶ They abode in God, and God in them,⁷ and they had an anointing which taught them concerning all things.⁸ Here is a doctrine of Man's Divine Sonship which possesses the most unqualified character. The root of man's being is found in God. In him we live and move. The witness of glorious

¹ 1 Cor. xi. 7. ² 1 Cor. iii. 16. ³ 1 Cor. vi. 19.
⁴ 2 Peter i. 4. ⁵ 1 John i. 3. ⁶ 1 John ii. 29, iii. 9, iv. 7.
⁷ 1 John iv. 12, 16. ⁸ 1 John ii. 27.

ideals within us is the very Spirit of God. The voice of duty is the immediate revelation of his will. The holy and exalted love of saints and martyrs is an indwelling of God, drawing them up into an intercommunion where the Divine and human indissolubly blend, and the trembling mortal becomes the organ and revealer of immortal power. This was the mighty and illuminating truth that flashed into disciples' hearts from the face of Jesus Christ, and amid the wrecks of a decrepit and unbelieving Christendom the world still waits for the manifestation of these sons of God.

It is as the founder of this spiritual brotherhood that Jesus stands alone in his pre-eminence as '*the Son of God.*' However you may criticise his history, whatever blots some may suppose they can detect in his character, whatever limitations there undoubtedly are in his teaching, this fact remains, that he caused the ideal of Divine Sonship to shine in the darkness of the

world, and that wherever faith in him is simple and true this ideal works as a redeeming power within the heart. If, as St. Paul says, he was 'appointed Son of God according to the Spirit of holiness,'¹ and if the Spirit of holiness is the Spirit of God which dwelt in him, and thus there is a metaphysical connection between him and God, so is it also, in their various degrees, with his followers. 'As many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God,' and the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in them.² And now we see what meaning we can attach to the idea of pre-existence. That the actual man, Jesus of Nazareth, pre-existed, is not taught by the most orthodox creed. But the earthly man is not all. The Spirit which was manifested in him was 'the eternal Life,' which weaves together the ages, which has ever dwelt in holy souls, which has spoken through law-giver and prophet, and which

¹ Rom. i. 4. ² Rom. viii. 11, 14.

is the idea lying at the heart of creation, so far at least as it is cognizable by man. Everyone who believes and loves *has* this eternal life. But most of us walk in shadows, and are strangely blind to the mystery of our own being. We too have come from God, we know not how; we too, when our time arrives, must go to God; and meanwhile, as we move between two eternities, we must love unto the end; for he that loves abides already in God, and God in him. When these things are dim, and the earthly element in us threatens to swallow up the Divine, we turn in faith to the creative and illuminating soul who has been to us as the bread and the water of life, and the peace of God steals gently into our hearts, and we feel once more that God is always nigh to man in order that man may draw nigh to him, and rest for ever in his love.

THE END.

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