

GENERAL VIEW OF CHRISTIANITY AND ITS MESSAGE FOR THE FUTURE.

BY THE REV. C. M. CHAVASSE, M.C., M.A., Rector of
St. Aldate's, Oxford.

DR. GLOVER in his *Jesus of History* quotes a remark by Seeley, "In thinking of the case they had forgotten the woman." A brilliant politician has recently been criticized for caring more for the fight than the cause. It was the exciting thrust and parry of Parliamentary debate which fascinated him, rather than the issue to be achieved. In the same way it is only too easy in thinking of Christianity to forget Christ. "Not what do I believe, but Whom." "Christianity is Christ." And a "General View of Christianity" can only mean a Vision of Christ, while His Message for this or any age is the possibility for every soul to know Him as friend knows friend.

Certainly those great movements which have revived the Church and converted the country have borne this simple Gospel.

St. Francis of Assisi, it has been said, "tore away the veil that had been hung between men and the Christ, and showed them a Master more imperative, a Hero more noble, a Lover more perfect than any of whom they had ever dreamed." So did St. Francis save European society when it was on the verge of collapse, because first and foremost he was aflame with love for Christ.

The Secret of the Reformation lay in its doctrine of the universal priesthood as declared in the rediscovered New Testament. And it was not till John Wesley had passed from "Methodism" to "Evangelicalism"—from the religion of a servant to that of a son—that he saved a Church that was the despair of Bishop Butler, and a country fast sinking into paganism.

It is for this reason that a forward movement in religion is so often termed a "going back" to Christ; and there is no Christian message or hope for the future, save "to see Him more clearly, to love Him more dearly, and to follow Him more nearly." Sometimes such clearer vision may be effected by a rediscovery of a forgotten truth. Sometimes it may be new light shed on old truths. But always it is a fresh vision of One Who is Himself Absolute Truth; the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever; even as John beheld Him at Patmos with hair white with the snows of eternity, but possessing the burning eyes of ageless youth.

If Christ then is Christianity—and a Living Christ the message for every age—*How may He be found and known?* And the undoubted answer is: "In Holy Scripture." For from the pages of the Gospels there emerges, as nowhere else, this transcendent figure of the Eternal Son of God. There we may behold Him at first hand, and hear from His own lips His message of three strands: Redemption, Power and Love.

Redemption. From first to last Our Lord saw Himself as the Suffering Servant of Isaiah giving His life a ransom for many. As His ministry opens, John Baptist hails Him as the Lamb of God, bearing away the sin of the world. He walks to Gethsemane declaring that He goes, as it is written of Him, to shed His blood for the remission of sins. A view of Christianity which does not possess as its central feature an Historic Cross which wrought out in time some mysterious transaction to remit the guilt of sin, is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and is forced to explain away His own express words concerning His Atoning work.

Power. Then, arising from this forgiveness of sin, Christianity is a message of power over sin, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the impact of the personality of the Glorified Saviour upon our wills. This promise of Power, like the assurance of forgiveness, is a feature unique to Christianity. As a Japanese Professor studying at Oxford once said, "My Confucius tells me what is the good life, but your Jesus Christ offers the help to live it." And it is this experience of the power of Christ, as reflected in the lives of others, which has ever constituted the great Christian appeal to the world. As a member of another school of thought testified of a group of undergraduates who had been to Keswick, "I like to be with them because, as nowhere else in Oxford, I can see lives changing and things happening."

Love. And Power is no selfish matter of mere personal self-mastery—it issues forth in Love of the Brethren. We are saved to serve. And the circumference of the Christ-centred life is as wide as the world, embracing all its interests and its every department. Once again Social Service is a peculiarity of the Christian Gospel. As the Rt. Hon. Srinvasa Sastri, himself the leader of the Hindoo "Servants of India" has confessed—"India owes every uplift directly or indirectly to Christian influence."

Forgiveness, Power, and Love, these are the three fundamentals in any general view of Christianity. But though the message has ever been the same, yet the emphasis laid upon its various portions has differed from age to age, and its implications have developed with added knowledge and discovery. Sometimes, I think, too much stress is laid upon the new truth by which each successive generation claims to have enriched the Christian Treasury. Almost invariably such new truth is exaggerated, and requires drastic modification in the future; while also men are so carried away by what is new that they neglect the older aspect of Christianity which is equally important. This has been the case both with Higher Criticism and Evolution, even though both have revolutionized our religious thought. And practically all the Protestant communions which stand apart from the Church of England, exist from a desire to safeguard some truth which the Church was overlooking; and which in many cases it regained; but too late to prevent the needed protest from materializing into a superfluous institution.

If therefore we would peer ahead to discover what will be the particular message of Christianity for the future, we can almost

certainly forecast it by comparing the present presentation of Christianity with that of the past—and so observing which of the Gospel fundamentals are being overlooked. New truth, thank God, will always look after itself. But in the future men will hunger for that of which they are being starved to-day, and which was the wholesome food of the past. You will remember Mr. G. K. Chesterton's famous parable of the eager adventurers who set out to discover the ideal country. They sailed round the world on their quest, and at last sighted the land of their dreams, only to learn on landing that they had returned home. In the same way our title, "The Message of Christianity for the future," has a romantic and adventurous sound, but I am inclined to believe that its burden will be found in what we have known but discarded. Proceeding, then, upon this assumption, let us ask what was *the Message of the Past*? What did our forefathers emphasize in their preaching of the Redemption and Power and Love taught by Christ?

As regards Redemption. We observe a deep sense of sin which found a true expression in the phrases of the General Confession and the terms of the Litany. And connected with this, they possessed a very definite theory of forgiveness, wrought out by a transaction on Calvary which was explained in precise and forensic language.

As regards Power. There was an implicit faith that all things were possible through Christ and the indwelling presence of the Spirit. The highest standard, therefore, was set up with regard to morals and ordinary behaviour, and lives were regulated according to rule and strict discipline.

As regards Love. This was taught and practised as incumbent upon individuals, and it was through individuals that social reforms were brought about. But care for the needy and unfortunate was looked upon more as a duty for Christians, than as a necessity in order to give all men the chance of a happy and spiritual life. "Otherworldliness" was almost interpreted as meaning that the conditions of this life could be ignored, if only salvation was assured hereafter.

It is easy to understand the background which produced the peculiar emphasis of the message of the past. The Bible was regarded as infallible because verbally inspired. Therefore there was no question concerning its contents, which were accepted as the final authority. This produced a lack of proportion in the sense of value attaching to the Old and New Testaments, and texts were quoted as final conclusions, without reference to their context or the history of their time. Thus the Old Testament was allowed rather to overshadow the New, producing a somewhat hard, strict, and gloomy Religion. God was very much the Judge, and Christ the pitiful Mediator. Men, too, did not inquire so much what was the mind of Christ upon the problems of life, and so try to discover eternal principles to regulate life, but they endeavoured rather to unearth some text which laid down a complete law for the particular perplexity of their age, and so they legalized every-

thing into hard and fast systems of right and wrong. There was also too much emphasis laid upon outward conformity to commandments, and not sufficient attention paid to the weightier inward matters of truth, mercy, kindness, and the like. Again the immediate expectation of our Lord's coming, visible in the earlier epistles, was transplanted a thousand years, and produced a blindness to appalling conditions of housing and industrial injustice. All this was the Lord's work when He came again to set up His Kingdom. While also, with this private access to the supreme authority of the Bible, the function of the Church was overlooked as a fellowship of the friends of Christ pledged to forward the Kingdom of God.

The Message of the Present Day is very largely a reaction from this position, as well as embodying fresh visions gained from scholarship, scientific discovery and modern outlook.

There exists to-day a Passion for Truth that cannot be over-estimated or withstood. The shock of the War, converting Christendom into a shambles, and overturning the whole existing order, has made youth profoundly suspicious of everything, so that the modern mind will take nothing for granted. The Church is suspect and the Bible is suspect. No longer will youth accept as a final argument the mere statement that the Church or the Bible says so. They inquire "Why does it say so?" "Is it right to say so?" And there has arisen a new authority of Moral Conscience. Men will not accept doctrines which they declare offend their moral conscience, or seem to their mind inherently untrue. This outlook has produced a profound change upon the Message of Redemption. It has reacted strongly against the old forensic explanation of the Atonement, which hurts the modern moral conscience, by seeming to maintain that the wrath of an angry God is appeased by the sight of the sufferings of Christ. It insists instead that God is love and His attitude to sinners eternally the same. The Parable of the Prodigal Son is produced as Christ's picture of forgiveness, where the son is forgiven by the Father without the demand of pain or penalties. And this reaction against the picture has culminated in a denial of the doctrine itself, so that the Cross is admitted as a vision of God's love for sinners, and as a proof of the enormity of sin, but is rejected as a propitiation for sin. Instead it is held that men beholding the love of God, and viewing sin as it really is, are naturally repentant and so drawn back to the Father. Thus the passion for truth has produced a much happier Religion. God is a Father; we are His children; and He will judge us according to our intentions.

Secondly, the outlook of to-day produces a passion for Reality. In its negative aspect a cry is raised against convention and cant and superstition. This has caused an irritation against much of the language of the Prayer Book. "Why call ourselves miserable sinners when we do not feel that we are sinners?" Men refuse to believe beyond their experience; and their sense of sin, already weakened by the loss of the Sacrifice once offered for sin, is almost totally banished by the inclination not to worry about sin if it cannot be felt.

On the other hand, in its positive contribution, this passion for reality has sought to recapture a Vision of Christ Himself. It is intolerant of anything that would put Him afar, or take His place, or wrap Him in the mists of Church ordinances. An undergraduate speaker at the Oxford Church Congress consulted his friends as to what youth wanted of the Church—and he came to the conclusion that youth wanted one thing, "Jesus Christ." Christ is very much the Companion in Life of the man of to-day. All books that help to make Him live in the Gospel story are read with avidity. But it is too much a purely Human Figure that is the final result. Men are inclined to doubt the Virgin Birth or the miraculous which might remove Him from themselves. And hence there is not the same profound trust in His Power, as in His sympathy and teaching. In any case sin to-day does not burden conscience; life is happy-go-lucky and errors forgivable. And this phenomenon at once causes, and is caused by, a practical ignoring of the power of Christ to revolutionize character.

Once more the modern mind is filled with a passion for social reform. It seeks to do more than merely assist those in misery; it will not tolerate their circumstances and seeks to alter them. As Bishop Temple has put it, the Church in the past regarded itself as the ambulance coming behind to pick up the casualties broken by industrial or social conditions, it did not seek to be the pillar of fire leading the hosts of God against oppression and injustice. But all this is changed. The War has broken down barriers and forced us to know that we are members one of another. Evolution has given us a new conception of a Kingdom to be built and a Body of Christ to grow up to the Perfect man. The Tractarian Movement has emphasized the function of the Church, and developed in us a Social Conscience that recognizes the equal value of each soul in the sight of God, and all that this involves. Indeed, now there exists a danger lest Social Reform should be considered as the whole of Christianity, and that if a man seeks to love his neighbour as himself, he is absolved from loving God with all his being.

A Passion for Truth which breeds a Passion for Reality—which again faces facts in life and engenders a Passion for Social Reform—these are the marks of the Christian Gospel as expressed to-day.

It remains to review what is lacking in this expression, in order to learn what will be the *message needed and required for the Future.*

In the first place, this Passion for Truth will grow and increase, and we shall have to deliver a clear statement concerning the Bible, defining and enforcing its inspiration. We must hand back the Bible to the people to read, and so first we must explain to them how they are to read it. On the one hand, therefore, we must teach the progressive inspiration of that Divine Library; or rather, as I like to think of it, the progressive powers of reception in man as he developed in religious appreciation, till he could at length receive the full revelation of the Word Himself. It is only so that we can estimate the Old Testament in its right proportion, and be saved from terrible dilemmas. On the other hand, we must declare

the need of the acceptance of the Gospels as a true record of our Lord's Life, otherwise we have no foundation for our belief in Him. This means that we must not pick and choose with regard to His words and actions. Some of these may present difficulties. If so we shall account them as difficulties ; we shall not explain them away as a gloss. Now the result of such a principle will be twofold. First, it will place once more the Cross, not the Incarnation, as the central feature of our Christian message. We shall not necessarily accept all the old pictures and explanations of the Atonement. But we shall declare that at Calvary there was wrought out a transaction which we cannot understand, but which satisfies our deepest needs, and which made forgiveness possible.

More and more men are hungering for a knowledge and assurance of forgiveness. There is always a response from a congregation if we preach to the conscience and declare the Saving work of Jesus Christ. There is an Advocate in every heart to do our work for us if we preach the things that Christ preached, and declare the mission He said He came to fulfil. So much evangelical preaching to-day is interesting, scholarly, and attractive, but lacks a message. Canon Simpson of St. Paul's has said that "Catholicism has a teaching, Liberalism a temper, but Evangelicalism a message." We are in danger of cutting out our message by our vague and foggy theories on the Cross. And if we possess no message, for what does Evangelicalism stand ?

Secondly, a re-established Bible would itself engender a sense of the sinfulness of sin, and develop in us a mind that should think according to the principles and values of God. There is great confusion of thought to-day as to what is right and what is wrong. Isolated texts from the Bible can be produced to prove anything ; and people are using their own judgment, swayed as they must be by prejudice, ignorance, or inclination. It has been said, for example, that it is probable that a Tax on Betting would be approved by the National Assembly. There would not exist this perplexity if we soaked our minds in the atmosphere of the Bible, and were so enabled to think like God ; to have this mind in us which was in Christ Jesus ; and to let the Holy Spirit guide us into all truth. If only we could get people to read their Bibles, they would possess the necessary outlook for the solution of any particular problem as it arose. Above all, Bible study would rediscover for us a Holy God. To-day the Christian Message is one of Love and Happiness—arising, not from a sense of forgiveness or of conscious power, but from carelessness and thoughtlessness. Our conception of God is weak and soft. He is Love, and we take advantage of that Love. The Holiness of God must be recovered, and what God means to us will then affect our outlook and ordinary behaviour.

First and foremost, then, I put the reading the Bible as a necessity, for seeing God as He is ; for seeing ourselves as we are ; and so replacing the message of the Cross in its central position.

We pass to the modern Passion for Reality. We cannot be too grateful to the liberal school for giving us a conception of the

Humanity of Our Lord, such as had been lost for centuries. To-day Jesus Christ is One Who can utterly understand, and sympathize with, every phase of human nature. He was not a Divine automaton passing among men, but He moves a man among His brethren, tired in body, troubled in mind, agonized in soul. But this indicates the need of a scrupulous jealousy concerning His Deity. There is a lack of reverence in our thought of Christ, sometimes an almost slangy familiarity in our references to Him, which is not only in the worst possible taste, but indicates a lack of knowledge of His Almighty and Divine Power. It is significant but disturbing that a fine society like "Toc H" should solemnly stand at their "Guest nights" to sing as their national anthem a soldiers' marching song called "Rogerum," which is merely a parody of Christ's Parable, "Dives and Lazarus."

"Let knowledge grow from more to more,
But more of reverence in us dwell."

For only in proportion as we reverence Our Lord Jesus as God, shall we instinctively trust His help and power in time of need. Let Christ be our Comrade—but not so much the Comrade that He ceases to be our Saviour!

Finally there is the modern Passion for Social Reform. This is all to the good, but it must be the result of, not the substitute for, the love of God shed abroad in our hearts. And we shall need in the future to recapture some of that individualistic religion which, let us remember, produced such benefactors as Wilberforce and Shaftesbury.

There has been a great movement in this direction the last few years at Oxford. Four years ago the only religious activity that seemed to catch on, was groups for social study. To-day these can be counted on the fingers of one hand, while prayer meetings have taken their place.

We shall be out of touch with the desires of thirsting souls to-day if we do not put spirituality and devotion in the forefront of our message, teaching men how to pray and to follow on to know the Lord. The times are a challenge to the clergy to revolutionize their own prayer life, and so to deepen the tone of their services, and be known as holy men of God as they touch the lives of their people. There is abroad a real longing for the Christian Message, and an anxious questioning concerning it. Let us thank God for the knowledge of the Fatherhood of God; the realization of the brotherhood of man; and the universal attraction to the Person of our Lord; which are the marks of the Christian Message of our day. If only in addition we proclaim the Holiness of that Father, the Deity of our Comrade Christ, and the propitiation of the Cross, then we shall bring very near that Revival of Religion for which we pray, and the first signs of which, we would fain believe, we can already discern. "Behold, I come quickly." "Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus."