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On Accepting Christ.

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The whole idea of accepting Christ rests upon an earlier idea, and that earlier idea may be expressed in some such way as this: Life reduces us all one by one to a position in which, if we are sincere with ourselves, we confess we have failed. It may be that we have erred or transgressed, and the fruits of our transgression have come back upon us overwhelmingly. Or it may be that, face to face with life, we have suddenly become aware of a certain moral weariness which makes the very prospect of days and years tiresome and intolerable. Or it may be that we have found ourselves out in some sinister and treacherous aptitude which honestly makes us afraid. Or it may be that in our thinking about life, about this whole human scene which at best is so ambiguous, so capable of diverse and contrary interpretations, with its mornings and its evenings, with its joys and its sorrows, with its headlong hours and its bitter reactions, with its love and its loss, with its life and its death,—it may be, I say, that the whole aspect of things puzzles and frustrates our will. But, however this sense of defeat and failure, of having been brought to a standstill, may come to us one by one, the New Testament doctrine of accepting Christ seems to myself to rest upon the idea that this sense of failure and defeat has indeed come, and that out of it, in a kind of struggle for our life, for our self-respect, for our sanity, we are now ready without reservation to let Christ help us.

I hold that this is not only a true statement of the New Testament relation between Christ and the human soul; it is also a sound and incontrovertible fact. One comes to Christ never, no matter how early, with a clean sheet, but always with a soul bearing within itself traces, reminiscences, of a moral career. And, at least so it seems to me, and such is my own experience, one comes to Christ with passion and utterly, when in some matter one suddenly perceives that something vital is about to be lost.

I hold that this certainly is the catholic experience of accepting Christ. Recall the great psalms which are fragments of human biography at some unusually acute passage. Recall the crises in the souls of the great saints, and I think you will always find that something had become no longer tolerable, and out of this intolerable sense the human soul, in weakness and fear and passion, committed itself to some one who could save it.

I know that this is far removed from the attitude which many good and serious people take in our own day. These rather suggest that the spiritual life should begin with a kind of admiration of Jesus, with an acquaintance with what He said and what He did, and how He moved amongst men; whereupon, it is assumed, there will be something about Him, some charm, some appeal to our sensibility, which will draw out our heart towards Him, that we shall be touched by the pathos and dignity of His life, and shall feel ashamed that human beings who share our nature should have compassed His brutal death; and that all this will soften men's hearts and reveal to them a way of meeting their own life and bearing themselves in their own hard hours and in facing in the end of the days their own abrupt passage from this sun-lit world.

Well, these are not days for good people to exaggerate their differences. God prosper every man who loves the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity and truth! All that I am saying is that in the New Testament and in history the first love of Jesus was a theological love of Christ. Those who loved Him and who first died for Him loved Him and died for Him not because of what we moderns call His charm (is there not a verse which the Early Church made much of from Isaiah, 'There is no beauty that we should desire him'?), but because they had come to perceive and, in the case of others, to believe, that in this Jesus was the long answer of God to that cry for relief, for deliverance, for security, which had broken from the great souls of their people in all generations.

And so our fathers made use of a formula which is by no means dead among us, a formula indeed which will never die, for apprehended with sympathy it is seen to embody a bit of imperishable truth; our fathers made use of the formula that there preceded conversion a state of conscience which they called 'conviction of sin.'

For myself, I think that they erred in making *that* the only strait gate and narrow way into the New Jerusalem. They erred perhaps in closing up other gates into the heavenly city each of which is a pearl,—something, that is to say, compounded of a wound and the agony of a wound and the resources in God for the healing of that agony. But they were not wrong in saying that, before one would give himself to Christ with passion and abandonment and great joy, there always was the conviction that there was no other course. They were wrong, I say, in barricading other gates against pilgrims; because it is not a man's sense of sin only that can bring him to a standstill in this world: but they were not wrong in saying that for every pilgrim the way led on to a narrow place, so narrow that a man standing there is quite alone with God.

This would all seem to mean that in the case of each of us there may be portions of our life long or short in which we are not aware of any discord or uneasiness or fear such as might urge us to seek relief of mind somewhere. And I think that the New Testament admits that there are such flat intervals when the eyes of our soul are closed. But the New Testament is equally sure that times come in every life when, for any one of many reasons, our heart and flesh cry out in some pain or uneasiness or actual fear. Then it is, the New Testament declares, a man must be loyal to himself, must be faithful to the uneasiness of his spirit, must set out in company with that uneasiness towards whatever promises him relief and light; and if such a man has heard of God, of Christ, if he has ever heard that we men are not alone in the world, he must not allow that urgent hour to pass.

'I am the vine; ye are the branches,' said Jesus; and I am sure our Lord intended us to ponder His words, words which were spoken with great gravity and deliberateness. As a branch is grafted into the vine not by bringing it loosely bark to bark, or even binding it with cords; as a branch is grafted on a vine by cutting the branch until it bleeds, and cutting the vine until it bleeds, and as then you press the bleeding branch into the bleeding tree, making them one in a common agony,—so a human life which becomes one with Christ in the New Testament sense, and one for ever, becomes one by an act of faith which is almost an act of desperation, clutching at Christ by the force of some elementary necessity.

There are two matters which compel us all to deal deeply with ourselves, matters which, unless we accept Christ with regard to them, reduce us to a fear and sadness in which, until it is relieved, we are at a standstill. The one matter is the whole question of the forgiveness of our sins; and the other the whole question of the meaning of this life of ours.

With regard to the former, I know that there is much in the intellectual fashion of our time and in our personal habits which has obscured the reality of that question, and has seemed for the time being to have blunted the edge of conscience; but I refuse to believe that any such dullness and incompetence for moral pain is more than a fashion. Nay, I will maintain that no human soul has always been free of those moral misgivings which in the great souls have cried out.

In order to bring the necessity for forgiveness home to us all with freshness, it may be necessary for us in these days to state the matter somewhat differently. The question with which St. Paul wrestled was, 'How can a man be just before God?' How can God forgive, that is to say, annul and undo, what we men have done against His holy laws? How can God forgive a man who has sinned? And, starting there, St. Paul could end honourably only by accepting the testimony of Jesus that God in Christ had taken upon Himself the sin of man. But perhaps we might bring it all home to ourselves more poignantly were we to put the same matter in another way; for example, in this way: 'How am I to forgive myself? How can I recover my self-respect? How can I deal with the accusations of my own mind?' This is the problem which struggles towards a solution in all the great work of the human soul in literature. It is the problem with which the Greek writers of tragedy wrestled. It is the problem of *Pilgrim's Progress*, and of *The Scarlet Letter*; and, in our day, of all the great literature of Russia. These more modern men can find only this solution: If I have sinned, I have sinned against some one. That some one has borne the stroke or weight of my selfish deed, and, now that I see the shame of my act, there is nothing left for me, until the day I die, but to try to make amends to that one or to those whom I have wronged. I

must hope for no heaven for myself which they cannot share. If any man hath aught against me, as our Lord put it, I must go and seek him and take him by the hand and share with him till the day I die every blessing life offers me.

But even that, when one looks deeply into it, is no solution, though that indeed is part of the Christian obligation. No: when all is said and done, with regard to those things that are past for which our conscience blames us, we must simply accept Christ. And the only way in which we can get back our sense of self-respect is, if you will, to make a kind of compact with Christ, and say, 'Well, Lord, if I accept from Thee this forgiveness, it can only be on this condition, that henceforward Thou hast the absolute right to control and to order and to possess my life. I am no longer my own; I am Thine, for Thy forgiveness' sake.'

The other matter on which life brings us to a standstill is as to the whole meaning of this world and our part in it. Here also, in the last push of the inquiry, I reach a point where I must accept Christ or reject Him. I may be in doubt as to what I ought to make of life; but Christ was in no doubt as to what He ought to make of life. I may be in doubt as to what it all means; but He was in no doubt as to what it all means. And what makes me a Christian is that I accept Christ: I take Christ's way.

When I say I accept Christ, I think I am beginning more and more to mean that I accept Christ's report and testimony both as to the human soul, its true nature, and as to God, His nature and purpose. When I say to-day I believe in Christ, I do not simply mean I believe that Christ lived; and at the moment I am not meaning that I assent to all the dogmatic propositions about Christ which the Church in her radiant days announced. When I say I believe in Christ, I want to be understood as meaning I believe in all that Christ stood for; I believe in that whole background and context of His Spirit as the sure and only reality. I do not mean by that to say that I see it all clearly; I rather mean that I am going to try to see it clearly. For is this not what we mean when we say we believe in anything? We do not mean that we see the thing which we believe. We do not mean even that the evidence for it is overwhelming. We mean rather that we are going to believe in it, that we are going to act as though it were incontrovertible to us.

The fact is I am coming more and more to think of my faith as my personal vote which all alone and in the Presence of God I register. Life is a matter on which we must all put down our name on the side of Christ or elsewhere on the paper. A man cannot escape a decision about life; and those who try to keep away from the voting-place are counted very properly as on the other side. Not to vote for Christ is to vote against Him.

I recall an experience, as once upon a time I was returning from New York to Liverpool. We sat one afternoon on board ship, four of us, talking. The other three were Americans, a husband and wife and another man. The conversation began somewhat casually, about American affairs, and was confined to those two American citizens. It took something like this direction: 'Well,' said a man from San Francisco, 'President Roosevelt is making a mess of things, isn't he?' to which the other, a friend of my own from New York, replied, almost casually also, 'I don't see that.' 'Why, are not your securities down five points already?' 'Oh yes,' replied the other, 'I believe some of my securities are down ten points.' 'Well!' said the one. 'Well!' said the other; and added, 'I think that a very small price to pay for the salvation of the country.' 'Oh, I don't go in for that way of talking,' said the first speaker, 'I think if we have the power in our hands we ought to use it for all its worth.' (I should have said that they were both very rich men.) 'But there you run right up against Christ.' 'Oh, I don't think the name of Christ should be brought into this proposition.' 'But I think the Name of Christ should be brought into all the propositions.' And, my friend continued, sitting now well forward in his seat, and speaking with an extraordinary seriousness, with sadness one might say: 'Look here, my young friend,' he said, 'I am an older man than you. I don't mean that I am a better man at all; but, as I have said, I think the Name of Christ should be brought into all the propositions. Men talk to-day as though we were here to do what we like. Now, as I figure it, we are here to do what is right. It's often mighty hard, and it's just there Christ helps me. He helps me to see what's right, and He makes trying to do it seem worth while!'

There was a silence for a few minutes, and afterwards, not unfriendlily, the other two left us. I turned to my friend, and—naming him—said, 'It did me good to hear you say these things. I felt I could not say them. Had I said them, wearing this collar and these clothes, he might have said afterwards, "Oh, that is so much professional talk; that is his job"; but you saying them—it was all wonderful.' To which, putting his hand deprecatingly upon my knee, and looking as it seemed to me across the waters, he said with a tone of conviction touched with something that sounded like sadness, but was not sadness, only a firmness and resoluteness of the soul, 'Well, Doctor, I'm in for Christianity!' It was as though he had said, 'The thing may be wrong. I don't know. But it is right for me. It is the thing that I would like to think is right. That is the kind of world I'd like to feel this world to be. That is the kind of world I'd like to help to make it. I'm in for Christianity!'

That is what an honest man means to-day who accepts Christ. He is in for Christianity; that is to say, he is out for it.

Entre Nous.

THE CHRISTIAN MINISTRY.

Action.

1. A minister of the parish of Kinneff, in Kincardineshire, was anxious that his son should succeed him. The parishioners had the right of election, and the schoolmaster was induced to do a little canvassing. One farmer refused to vote for the son. 'What for no?' said the schoolmaster. 'Because he cannot preach.' 'He cannot preach? *He keeps a good sough going.* What more do you want?'

The farmer wanted more, and so did the majority of the parishioners. But the schoolmaster had a good argument. For did not Demosthenes mean something of that kind when he said that the first thing in oratory was *action*, the second thing *action*, and the third thing *action*?

We owe the anecdote to the *Lives of the Ten Orators*, which is ascribed to Plutarch. It is not to be found in the authentic *Life of Demosthenes*, by Plutarch, but the narrative there is worth quoting:

'Another time, when the assembly had refused to hear him, and he was going home with his head muffled up, taking it very heavily, they relate that Satyrus, the actor, followed him, and being his familiar acquaintance, entered into conversation with him. To whom, when Demosthenes bemoaned himself, that having been the most industrious of all the pleaders, and having almost spent the whole strength and vigour of his body in that employment, he could not yet find any acceptance with the people, that drunken sots, mariners, and illiterate fellows were heard, and had the hustings for their own, while he himself was despised. 'You say true, Demosthenes,' replied Satyrus, 'but I will quickly remedy the cause of all this, if you will repeat to me some passage out of Euripides or Sophocles.' Which, when Demosthenes had pronounced, Satyrus presently taking it up after him, gave the same passage, in his rendering of it, such a new form, by accompanying it with the proper mien and gesture, that to Demosthenes it seemed quite another thing. By this being convinced how much grace and ornament language acquires from action, he began to esteem it a small matter, and as good as nothing for a man to exercise himself in declining, if he neglected enunciation and delivery. Hereupon he built himself a place to study underground (which was still remaining in our time), and hither he would come constantly every day to form his action, and to exercise his voice; and here he would continue, oftentimes without intermission, two or three months together, shaving one-half of his head, that so for shame he might not go abroad, though he desired it ever so much.'

From this comes the story in the *Lives of the Ten Orators* that when some one asked him, What is the first thing in oratory? he said, 'Action'; what the second? 'Action'; what the third? 'Action.'

What did he mean by Action?

(1) J. G. Holyoake thinks that by action Demosthenes meant *practice*. 'Action,' he says, 'gives no