

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT JESUS.

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[CONCLUSION.]

V. JESUS AS THE FOUNDER OF CHRISTIANITY.

The conventional questions may now be asked. How can the rise and history of Christianity be accounted for in any other way than upon the presupposition of a unique founder? For the most progressive nations are to-day accounted Christian. The Christian religion under some one of its forms is still winning converts. This seems at first a very formidable question, but the answer is much plainer than it is often made to appear. It grows out of a mass of familiar knowledge about the rise and development of religions.

In the first place there seems to be no ground to believe that the actual Jesus, even in the rôle of Messiah, ever intended to found a new religion. The old religion at its best was good enough for him. It was a religion of justice, mercy, peace, reverence. This was all that Jesus preached. It only needed to be freed from its tribal narrowness and its vexatious details of ceremony in order to become a religion good enough for all men. The spirit of a broader humanity was already in the air. If Paul had really known the religion of his own people, as taught in the sixth chapter of Micah, it is hard to see to what else he would have needed to be converted. It is certain that with such a religion he could never have been a persecutor, much less an enemy of Jesus! Of all the denominations in Christendom the Quakers seem to have been nearest to Jesus's thought. If one fact is sure, it is that Jesus never founded the elaborate congeries of systems historically known as "Christianity." It is preposterous to suppose that he would have understood the claims, the colossal machinery and the magnificent pomp of the Roman Catholic and other sacerdotal churches.

As to the rise and development of Christianity, two quite different theories appear. One is that the mighty stream of Christian history is traceable back substantially to a single fountain or source,

namely, the life and teaching of Jesus, as men may once have guessed that the mysterious Nile had a single source. This idea seems to be out of line with all the analogies of history and of human life. The other thought is that the great stream flows from innumerable sources, with contributing fountains in every land and from every period of history, with daily accretions to-day, as if from the constant rain and the dew. The stream of religion flowed before Jesus was. A long line of unknown psalmists and lovers of righteousness fed the strong spring of his life, as from underground sources. A noble group of men, close to him and following him, each added the momentum of their lives to the new flow of the current. At this point the stream took Jesus's official name, as the continent of America took the name of Americus Vespucci, or might better have taken the name of Columbus, without the slightest word of disparagement of other brave and great voyagers who under a common inspiration sailed the same seas. The analogy between the founding of Christianity and the discovery of America is very suggestive. We have the same analogy in the history of every invention. No person ever accomplishes anything alone. No one can be given the sole credit for any attainment.

The truth is, that the early Christianity obviously owed its success very largely to the indefatigable labors of Paul, whose genius took it out of the lines of a Jewish sect and gave it a quasi universal character. As Jesus founded no new religion, so he wrote no books and professed to bring no new doctrine. There is no certainty that he appointed apostles, least of all twelve in number. Suppose that he had merely emphasized the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, though in the clearest manner. Does any one imagine that a new religion could have been established and made to endure on this simple basis, in the age of Nero and in the face of Gothic invasions?

The primitive Christianity was involved with certain very natural, and fascinating ideas, lying close to the borderland of error, which, like alloy mixed with the gold, gave it common currency. One of these ideas, akin to the belief of modern spiritualists, was the bodily or physical resurrection of Jesus. This appealed tremendously, as such a notion always does appeal, to the popular imagination. This was the burden of Paul's preaching, though he seems for himself not to have credited a physical resurrection so much as the repeated appearance of Jesus in his "spiritual body." (1 Cor. xv. 44.)

The early Church also seems to have looked for the miraculous coming of their Lord from heaven to judge the world. (See 1

Thes. vi. 14 etc.) This was an idea to conjure with and to make converts. The grand expectation in the early Church of supernatural events about to spring forth made such a book as the Apocalypse possible.

Again, the early Christianity, just like Christian Science to-day, was a vigorous health cult, all the more persuasive from the common delusion that devils were the cause of disease. The Christian healer, at the magic name of Jesus, could cast out the devils, and cure the sick. Imagine this idea removed from the early Christianity, and try to think what would have been the collapse of faith. These three great ideas, like so many strong strands, helped mightily to hold Christians together, till the new religion came to be fortified with the priest-craft, the pomp and power of imperial Rome. Then it largely ceased to be Jesus's religion at all.

The development of Christianity from the working of natural means and the play of human motives, allies it with the rise of other great cults. Thus, while the Buddha gave a name to Buddhism, he certainly did not create the religion. But he served as an intermediary to give a new and popular turn to the prevailing religion of his people. A religion is always greater than its founder. Otherwise we should have to assume needless dignity for the authors of various modern cults. We have spoken of the Madonna worship. But no one outside of the Catholic Church thinks it necessary, in order to explain the origin of the worship, to suppose that Mary was better than other mothers. It is interesting to recall that in Paul's case, he seems not to have known Jesus "after the flesh," that is, the actual Jesus. His Jesus was an ideal person and all the more powerful. The relation of the founders of a great religion to the course of its growth is like that of the founders of a nation or a dynasty. We gladly owe our thanks to King Alfred and Washington, but we owe our thanks to many another good patriot as well without whose help we could never have heard of Alfred or Washington.

VI. CERTAIN POSITIVE CONCLUSIONS.

It may be that the old word will be uttered again, at least in some form: "They have taken away my Lord." If we can never be sure what the actual Jesus was like, what becomes, you ask, of the "leadership of Jesus"? We answer, in the very words attributed to Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, and which contain a world of wise suggestion. "It is expedient for you that I go away." It is another instance of the familiar case where the vase that bore the exquisite

perfume must be broken in order to use the perfume. The letter must go that the spirit may prevail.

To be perfectly frank, as we are bound to be by every consideration of honesty as well as religion, the actual and historical man Jesus is not, and has long since ceased to be, the one leader or Master in religious life, or in the progress of mankind. He is not the real authority of the modern man in any church, either for conduct or religion.

Let us face this fact seriously, for it is very important. In the first place, the ideal man whom we modern people demand as the pattern of our lives, is not, as we have seen, the Jesus of the Gospels. It is indeed a different ideal for every man and woman. But for us Americans, it must be modern and American. Jesus was a Jew, unmarried, the father of no children, apparently somewhat skeptical of the marriage relation (Matt. xix: 10-12), as Paul was. He was not a citizen but only a subject of the empire; he was not a man of affairs; he had nothing to do with art; he was the example of a Hebraic type, in contrast to the generous Greek type of life. The dominant thought of the cross and the resurrection puts him somewhat away from the normal healthy-minded youth and man. Our actual ideal, on the contrary, is of a patriot, a husband and father, a man of affairs, a man of the world, in the noblest sense of the word, whose business it is, not so much to die bravely as to live nobly, while fearless of death. Our ideal embraces both the Hebraic and the Classic type in a larger pattern than either. This is a different ideal from that which the name of Jesus Christ represents. It is absolutely essential to teach this ideal to our generation with freedom and heartiness.

As a matter of fact the world of Christendom has never taken Jesus's life seriously as a possible life to pattern after. The world does not now take it in earnest. "Ah," men say, when Jesus is mentioned, "His life was out of the common. It was supernatural. No one else could do as he did; no one can be like him." The words, the "leadership of Jesus" in certain mottoes doubtless set before most people the figure of a somewhat exalted personage, walking in advance and apart from the rest of the world. Do our Sunday school children think that Jesus ever smiled? He is mostly an unreal man, with an unreal or quite exceptional mission. This is unfortunate for the teaching of the art of the good life as normal and gladsome. People actually come to use the exceptional character of Jesus's life as an excuse for doing nothing practical with his noblest teachings!

More important yet, as we have already shown, there are very naturally elements in the story of the actual Jesus which appear seriously misleading and even unethical in the light of our best spiritual truth. Men call Jesus's example difficult and "unpractical" on the side of his faith, his sense of duty, his devotion, his non-resistance, but they constantly cite his frequent use of anger and denunciation. We cannot afford any longer to let them quote that unlovely passage about his driving out the money-changers from the temple, whenever justification is wanted for bitter words, for a quarrel or a war. We cannot permit men to use Jesus's mighty example for calling their fellows hypocrites and "a generation of vipers"; we cannot let them quote his authority for buying swords.¹¹

Men have indeed often put a high use to the question: "What would Jesus do?" as a mode of guidance in problems of conduct. What they really mean is what would the most perfect man do? They evidently cannot know what the actual Jesus would have done for example, with the problem of temperance in the United States, or with the backward races, or even with legislation upon the subject of divorce. Each man proposes as Jesus's presumable answer the judgment of his own conscience. The Italian Roman Catholic or German Lutheran sees no moral difficulty in the story that Jesus made wine out of water and prescribed the perpetual use of wine in the sacrament of the Eucharist. Millions of people in America on the other hand see in wine no longer the symbol of pure joy but of degrading temptation. Such considerations suggest the absence of any express or infallible ethical standard to which men may resort as to an oracle and have an answer to their questions free of the costly discipline of thought, experience and sympathy. Is not this because ethical and spiritual development, so far from being based on a set of finite rules, is an endless process of movement toward the conception of an infinite Good Will? The loss of personal acquaintance with the actual Jesus,—a man who stands in the past,—is in fact the facing about towards the noblest ideal of the living God.

Meanwhile the need and the sense of personal companionship in the good life do not depend at all upon the belief in Jesus as the only perfect man. Who does not have the ideal companionship of actual friends among the living as well as among the departed? In other words, we steady our consciences many a time by asking: What would my father or my mother, my wife or my friend do and

¹¹ Luke xxii. 36. But compare the fine passage Matt. xxvi. 52.

say in this emergency? This appeal of the imagination is as effective as it is to ask: What would Jesus do?

It is often said that a religion must be personal. In other words, it must worship a founder: its sentiment must cling around a single object. There is a valid truth here. It is the truth embodied in the faith that God in some sense is a person and not an abstract force. A vital religion conceives of a Life, an Intelligence, a Good Will, with whom we can come into unison, who may reverently be said to care for or love us, in doing whose will we have peace, satisfaction and gladness. In this high sense, religion must be personal.

Religion is also made manifest through symbols and through persons. But it is not true that it is dependent upon a single symbol or personal manifestation. Vast as the loss would be if we could suppose the history of religion to be blotted out to the beginning of the eighteenth century, we surely could not therefore lose religion. The fact is, there are many symbols and numerous personal manifestations of religion. It has been said that Jesus showed both what God is like and what man may be. We say a larger thing. The present generation has seen thousands of men and women who have shown us what God is like and what man may be. He is indeed poor who has not known some such beautiful life. When therefore Jesus takes his natural place in the marching ranks of mankind we have not lost a single personal element from our religion. We behold a great company of lovable, heroic and admirable lives.

There is one great use of Jesus's life which will perhaps always remain. In many respects he stands as a familiar and notable type of humanity. The old view of him as the single Saviour of the human race passes away as soon as men cease to think of themselves as a doomed, or "lost" race, that is, wherever the modern evolutionary doctrine holds good of a race in process of becoming. But there is a continual need, no longer for a unique Saviour, but for innumerable helpers, saviours and lovers of men. Jesus is doubtless the best known name among this great and growing class.

Again, it seems to be a spiritual law that no one can be a helper of his fellows except through obedience to a deep law of cost. It matters little whether one dies or lives for the sake of his fellows. He must in any case give his life cheerfully in order to lift the level of the common humanity. Jesus's case is the typical instance of this great law of cost and willingness. But we all have to obey it. Every good mother knows it as well as Jesus.

I wish to leave the impression as strong as possible that we

have gained and not lost anything, in this view of Jesus. Let me make my meaning clear by a simple parable. A child was once given a costly gem. It was wrapped in many coverings and hidden away in a dark closet so that he rarely could see it. He fondly supposed that it was the only gem in the world. At last a whole handful of beautiful jewels were set before him. Is he poorer or richer than before? Is he poorer because he now knows more than ever about gems? He does not even care in his joy at the variety of beauty before him, which gem is the largest or the most near mathematical perfectness in his collection.

It remains to treat Jesus naturally, as we treat all the benefactors of our race. With all modesty we do not range ourselves exclusively as the disciples of any single great man, not of Socrates or Plato in philosophy, not of Homer or Dante in poetry, not of Michael Angelo or Praxiteles in art, not of Beethoven or Wagner in music, not of Newton or Bacon or Darwin in science. We use and enjoy and admire them all. We make all of them serve as object lessons, each in his own way. Our wealth of human interest and sympathy thus grows larger. Marching in one grand procession, they all and each of them stir us to practical effort and valid hope better than a single unique, lonely, and unattainable Master, if such there were, could ever stir us. There is a new sense of a grand companionship to which we all belong.

This natural view of Jesus is in line, as the exclusive and exaggerated view of him is not in line, with the whole trend of the democratic thought of our age. To most men even yet Jesus is the center and head of a monarchical scheme of religion. It is easy to bow in church and make a king of one who lived and died twenty centuries ago. Such homage costs little reflection and no effort of substantial good will. The democratic ideal, on the other hand, conceives of a host of men, all of one common nature, all associated together as members of one family, all needing both to help and to be helped, to give and to take of each other, to teach and to be taught, to inspire and to be inspired by every fresh act and word of friendliness and devotion. There is here no one Master or Leader or Saviour,—like a king-cell in the human body. There is reciprocity; there is mutuality. If one has it in him to show the structure and the gleam of the diamond, all men also may show the same glint, and enter into the same beautiful structure. This alone is spiritual democracy.

The only objection to this view of Jesus's relative place in the world of men comes from the side of the temporary hurt to our

sentiment. The same sentimental opposition was once raised to a democratic government, free of any sole figure of a king to revere, and about whom to rally the nation. It has been found that the sentiment of loyalty may be more mighty and effective, as well as far more sane, among the citizens of a republic than among the subjects of an empire. It has been found that men are abundantly willing to die for the sentiment of a rational citizenship in a great republic. Be sure that no sentiment which is good for anything can be permanently harmed by facing the light of day.

This view of Jesus's relation to human nature is absolutely called for by the practical purposes of ethical education. You cannot easily make the life of Jesus interesting and persuasive to the ordinary boy or youth. There is too little usable incident. Throwing out the wonder-stories, there is a fatal lack of material to make into continuous lessons sufficient for several years of Bible study. Barring exceptions and the work of teachers of marked genius, the child's mind becomes weary of the study of Jesus. The scenery is foreign to him, and the moral and spiritual experiences are remote. How many Sunday school teachers have ever had such an acquaintance with Jesus's life in any of its phases as to be able to make young people acquainted with it?

Take your freedom now! Use Jesus just as you would use any other grand figure of the distant past, precisely as it happens to impress you. Use it much or little, for your own help or for the training of youth, accordingly as it commends itself to you as usable. Then add to it, in democratic and natural fashion all the treasures of biographical material with which our world is growing rich. Add the lives of men and women who have impressed themselves upon our own generation, and have helped to make human history nobler. Tell as many stories from every source as you can, all going to show the glory, the success, the happiness, the health of the good life. Has not the impulse come to you toward this life, almost as if from the atmosphere you breathe? It is doubtless the atmosphere of goodwill. See to it that this atmosphere is around your youth in the home, as well as in the church, or Sunday-school room.

Be sure finally that there is that in human life which is greater than the greatest man. It is the spirit of man, or rather the spirit of God. Wherever the good spirit is there is God. Wherever this spirit is in history, history ceases to be profane and becomes sacred. Wherever this spirit possesses men there is not one son of God, but all are God's children. Nothing less than this is the gospel for to-day.