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Clergyman Of County Seat Says Birth Of New Religion, Like Creation Of A New Orb, It At Once Source Of Amazement And Delight.

(By Richard W. Wickes)

In the charming Villa of Count Fabbricotti, at Florence, there is a Michael Angelo, selecting material from which to shape his immortal conception of Moses. The scene is laid in Carrara; the mountains, whose white quarrier show like snow in a garden of verdure, forming a striking background to an interesting group of admirably executed figures. Near the front of the painting a youth bends over an open portfolio, and among the sketches one is disclosed of the Hebrew lawgiver; to the right appears the form of the master workman, directing attention to an enormous block of spotless marble, while in the center stands, most conscious of all the famous artist himself. Both the pose and the countenance of Michael Angelo are indescribably impressive and suggestive. He seems to be intent on searching the flawless stone for the outlines, proportions and features of the wondrous hero, who had dared supplicate God for the vision of his glory, and who had been exalted to be the mouthpiece for the ten commandments, before whose moral grandeur four thousand years have trembled. But there is a touch of pathetic indecision in the noble face of the sculptor, otherwise strong and resolute, as though he feared his hand might lose its cunning before the lofty ideal born of his genius could be imparted to the virgin marble.

One greater than Michael Angelo trod the obscure ways of Palestine two thousand years ago. A sublime purpose ruled in his mind and heart. The Christ had come to inaugurate a kingdom unlike any empire that had reigned in ages past, and which was to be shaped out of discordant and anarchical humanity. It requires but a slight effort of the imagination to picture Him with thoughtful brow, contemplating the rude and poor material not yet hewn from the quarries of worldiness and heathenism, in which and through which he should achieve most marvelously, and which would sometimes splinter beneath the stroke of his fashioning chisel. But, unlike the Italian artist, there is never, in his manner or expression, the least sign of doubt as to his ultimate success. Jesus has neither failed nor been discouraged but has established a kingdom that shall stand through the ages.

The birth of a new religion, like the creation of a new orb, is at once the source of amazement and delight. When a star, unseen before, comes out of its hiding and passes before the vision of the telescope, the astronomer not unnaturally is startled and moved to joy. And when a faith breaks on the darkness of the world, and reveals truth hitherto hidden from mankind, it is not unreasonable that surprise and gladness should assert themselves. Thus when Christianity which had existed in the Divine thought from the eternities, passed into the field of history some twenty centuries ago, the angels with jubilant voices, caroled "good will"; the shepherds were astonished and wherever the news was heard a thrill of blissful expectation exalted lowly people.

Now today we are face to face with many questions that disturb and perplex. We have heard the voices of critics raised against the church. Have we need therefore to feel that these things which we love will ever pass into the discard? Are we to feel that Calvary is to be a forgotten spot? Are we to think that Christianity is ever to be overthrown? They tell us that it is true that Mohammadanism is making more converts than Christianity. Is this to cause us to trouble? Only if we have forgotten that God is a God of eternity. Christianity is born of God and through God will survive though all hell be pitted against it.

But to understand with fullest conviction that this is true we must understand what Christianity is. Hence the question, "What is Christianity?" The church is the makeup as we know it may go but Christianity, never!

I have no doubt that if we all read pages of history relative to the churrch that we would all agree that there were periods and hours in her life that we would all hate. At times she has been the one power in the world that retarded progress. Persecution and death have been the instruments whereby she has sought the world do her bidding. But in reading thus we are at fault if we try to make this the crime of Christianity and not that organization called the Church. There is nothing in the teachings of Christianity nor in the spirit of its founder that would prompt a man or an organization to take such steps to compell men t odo as he is told.

"What is Christianity?" The difficulty that we meet at the outset is that in spite of himself each man gives his own and peculiar turn of mind as the answer. So that the social worker feels that the cleaning up of the slums is the real heart of Christianity. New and better homes. Surroundings that will give the environment that he thinks will have its effect upon the growing life about him. He he quotes texts to prove his contention. The rabid prohibitionist thinks that no man can be Christian who takes his glass of wine or whiskey. And he too, in turn, quotes texts to prove that no man should be called Christian who believes that a man can be a follower of Christ and yet partake of the drink that it is claimed will send all cares and troubles into oblivion or who looks upon the cup when it is red. But as we answer the question "What is Christianity?" in this way we are confronted with other questions.

The answer is not found in the pages of its history. As has already been said, there are things there of which the followers of the Lord Christ should be ashamed. But we do have those who appeal to history and bid us find in the acts of the church fathers the theme and the answer to our question. But were not Augustine, Origen, Chrysostem and others but disciples or learners even as the rest of us? Was Augustine blessed with a greater ability to interpret the teachings of Jesus except the blessing of time?—that is, nearer to the day in which the Prince of Life lived as man? Surely I believe that we should give due weight to all Augustine taught, but not believe it only because he taught it. There is nothing true in the world so far as I am concerned except as I have experienced it. I may accept it, but it is not in the whole sense true unless I have had it marked in my life's experiences. Hence I reserve the right to test by my experience all that he or others teach. Rufus Jones says: "Harnack, Tolstoy and Loisy have given three characteristic answers to the great question. Their books are touched with genious and will long continue to be read, but, like other books, they too, reveal the writers rather than solve the central problem."

Where then are we to look? In the message of Paul? But Paul did not come to his full message with his vision on the road to Damascus. With him as with us it was a growth. He had to grow in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus. What of his three years spent in silence? What went on there we do not surely know, But this much is certain, no man could have had the experience and thus the certainty of the truth of a risen Lord like Paul had on the road to Damascus except it change his whole life and send him into the inner sanctuary of his soul to search for an answer. I suspect above all mortals Paul is responsible for our Christian theology. But that does not mean that in Paul we find the answer to our question. For Paul was mortal and like mortals he was bound to let his own mind have play. To what extent did he allow his own ideas to fashion his conception of a world mission? At first you will recall Paul thought that the return of Christ would happen at once. But this idea was modified later in life when he began to see that the mission of Jesus was bigger than he had thought. But notwithstanding, his supreme joy was in the service of his Lord for whom he would be willing to, and did, die. His faith in Jesus as the Savior of mankind never swerved nor his belief that Christ would sometime redeem his own.

Then are we to look to the creeds of Christendom? But we have so many! Which are we to choose? And again if we would make these the test we must separate that large if not larger element of Greek philosophy from the pure original gospel. The creeds will not tell us what Christendom is.

Today we hear much of the "Mellenium." Is that our answer? But that idea was first a Gentile and then a Jewish belief and is not truly Christian. Professor Shailer Matthews in his book "The Mellenial Hope" shows by historical evidence (the best evidence) that this is not a Christian belief.

Not to the teachings of Jesus exclusively are we to go for the answer. To make myself clear may I say that I firmly believe that the teachings of Jesus are the only hope of the world. Lloyd George is quoted as saying that America and England are trustees of the present civilization. There have been other nations that have held that trusteeship, but Europe today stands condemnued before the bar of justice, for she thinks that force is ta be the power that will conserve the present order. We are not to be satisfied with our present order. But force will never bring in that perpetual order that will spell contentment for a world and answer the age-old longing of men's hearts for a permanent peace.

Almost without exception the best thinkers of the world today acknowledge that the spirit of Jesus is the only thing that will save the world. Now there is no place in the world that the true spirit of Jesus is preached as it is in America and England. In Germany a state church has controlled the utterances of its pulpits with the exception of an insignificant minority. The same thing is true of Russia in the old days. The Greek Church with its icons, festivals and pictures have led ignorant millions to the worship of these rather than to the Son of God. It is true that England has its State Church, but when such men as Jewett and Dixon, when he was pastor of Spurgeon's Chapel, are at large preaching the spirit of love through Jesus then you have a leavening multitude that makes possible a new world. Anywhere in America we have such fearless preachers as Massee, Stratton, Fosdick, Evans, Truett, Kirk, and a host of others it is easy to see that we do hold in a way that no others in the world have ever held in trust the civilization of the world.

So that when I say that we do not find Christianity alone in the words of Jesus I say it because to do that will fling us into a legalism as hard as that to which the Jew was subjected.

Figuratively you have thrown up your hands and said that then we cannot find the answer to the question of "What is Christianity?" To the contrary we find here the very answer. For if it is not found in His disciple, nor in His History, nor yet in His teachings we must find it in Himself. We cannot fully comprehend the meaning of Christianity until we take into account the fact that the invisible, resurrected Christ is the continuation through the ages of the same revealation zegun in the life and teachings of Jesus. Galilee and Judea mark only one stage of the gospel, which is, in its fullness an external gospel. The Christian revelation which came to light first in one Life—its master interpretation and incarnation—has since been going forward in a continuous and unbroken manifestation of Christ through many lives and through many groups and through the spiritual achievements of all those who have lived by Him. Christianity is, thus, the revelation of God through the personal life—God humanly revealed," says Rufus Jones. Paul and John were the first to reach this prifound insight and they were followed by those in the Pentecostal experiences of the early Christians. Christianity is the inward experience of the invisible Spiritual Christ. Christianity is not a creed, nor a church, nor a gospel, but a way of living as determined by the Christ. The God as revealed by Jesus was Father. Against this some think of God as the power of the natural order. Others think of him as the God of the Old Testament. But God is not made up of these or any characterizations of Him. This is to misunderstand Him! Christianity is a unique revelation of God, for in this men have come to know Him as a God who identifies Himself with His people, with their suffering and as a sharer of their joys.

Love and truth and grace are as much a reality as the chairs upon which we are seated or the mountains whose breasts are covered with the canopy of nature. Christianity is the living, invisible, eternal Christ and is as real as electricity. For as the power known as electricity needs an instrument to make itself seen, so Christ needs men to make him known and seen by a world. Christianity is not a creed nor a book nor an institution, but Christ living in you and me.

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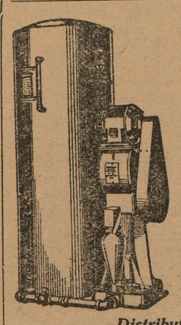

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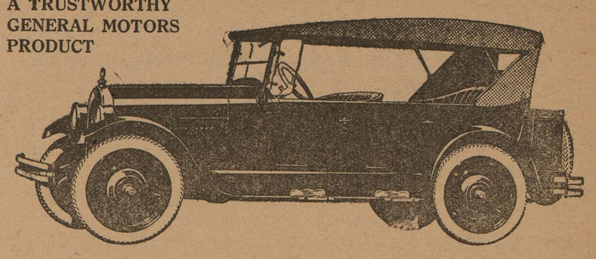

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