

The Gospel for an Age of Doubt

The Yale Lectures on Preaching, Lyman Beecher Foundation, for 1896

II.—The Gospel of a Person¹

By the Rev. Henry van Dyke, D.D.

Pastor of the Brick Presbyterian Church, New York

HOW SHALL THE PREACHER SERVE THE PRESENT AGE?

The prevalence and the quality of modern doubt, with its discontent and sadness, its self-misgivings and reactions, its moral inconsistencies and fine enthusiasms, bring the preacher who is alive and in earnest face to face with the most important question of his life. What can I do, what ought I to do, as a preacher, to meet the strange, urgent, complicated needs of such a time as this?

First of all, as a man (and every preacher ought to be a man, though not every man is bound to be a preacher)—as a man, it is necessary to lead a clean, upright, steadfast, useful life, purged from all insincerity, and lifted above all selfishness, and especially above that form of religious selfishness which is the besetting peril of men who feel themselves rich in faith in the midst of a generation that has been made poor by unbelief. Never has there been a time when character and conduct counted for more than they do to-day. A life on a high level, yet full of helpful, healing sympathy for all life on its lowest levels, is the first debt which we owe to our fellow-men.

But beyond this, is there not something personal and specific which the conditions of the present demand from us, as men who have not only the common duty of living, but also the peculiar vocation of speaking directly and constantly to the inner life of men? We want something distinct and definite, which is to be clearly formed in our thought and feeling and utterance, as the central, guiding, dominating force in all our efforts to realize the fine aspiration of the old hymn:

To serve the present age,
My calling to fulfill—
Oh, may it all my powers engage
To do my Master's will!

Now, the moment we look at the problem in this light, we see that there are various lines of activity open to us, and along all of these lines men are making promises and prophecies of usefulness and success. The cures which are suggested for the malady of the age are many and diverse. Of some of them we need speak only in passing, to recognize that for us at least they are unsuitable.

PROPOSED REMEDIES

Herr Max Nordau, for example, in his curious and chaotic book "Degeneration," diagnoses the sickness of modern times as the result, not of a loss of faith, but of a fatal increase of nervous irritability produced by the strain of an intricate civilization. He declares that the malady must run its course, but that in time it will be healed by the restorative force of "*misoneism*, that instinctive, invincible aversion to progress and its difficulties that Lombroso has studied so much, and to which he has given this name."²

The name is certainly not a pretty one, nor do I think that after the first feeling of pleasure in learning to pronounce a new and difficult word has passed, the contemplation of its meaning will afford us any profound sense of satisfaction or hope. The picture of mankind as a magnified Jemmy Button, returning from his temporary residence in England to his native Terra del Fuego, and flinging away his gloves and patent-leather shoes to relapse into a peaceful and contented barbarism, is not inspiring. Who is there that would care to devote his life to the hastening of such a result? Who but the veriest quack, himself affected by the hysteria of the age, would think of curing the convulsions of St. Vitus' dance in an overstrained humanity by throwing the patient into the stupor of typhoid fever?

PHILOSOPHIC DOUBT

But there are two other ways of dealing with current doubt, which demand closer attention. One of them is the philosophic method of a *reductio ad absurdum*. The logic of Rationalism is applied to its own premises in order to show that they are unfounded and unverifiable. The result of this attack, as it has been made with a relentless and masterly hand by the Hon. Arthur James Balfour in his "Defense of Philosophic Doubt," is to exhibit the startling fact that "the universe as represented to us by science is wholly unimaginable, and

that our conception of it is what in Theology would be termed purely anthropomorphic.¹ The evidence for the existence of a world composed of atoms and ether is no more conclusive, the account which science gives of their nature and qualities is no more coherent, than the evidence and account which faith gives of a world created by a personal God and inhabited by immortal souls. Pure agnosticism is thus forced into the service of Christianity, and used to destroy all *a priori* objections to it. Giant Doubt is brought low by turning his own weapons against himself, even as Benaiah, the son of Jehoiada, slew the Egyptian "with his own spear."²

The value of this service of philosophy is considerable. The Christian preacher ought not to be ignorant of its actual results, for they are such as to encourage him in preserving his independence against the tyrannous claims of positivism; nor unfamiliar with its methods, for they are fitted to train and discipline his mind by hard exercise and exact work. But it must be remembered that only a mighty man of valor, one who, like Benaiah, ranks above the host and above the thirty captains of the host, can hope to play a leading part in this enterprise of "carrying the war into Africa." It must be remembered also that the reduction of scientific naturalism to an absurdity falls far short of the establishment of religious faith as a verity. Grateful for all that philosophy can do and is doing to clear the way, the preacher must have a principle, an impulse, a line of action which will carry him beyond the negative result of making unbelief doubtful, to the positive result of making belief credible.

THEOLOGICAL FORTIFICATION

At this point our attention is called to another way of dealing with current skepticism: the dogmatic method, which relies for the defense of faith upon the construction of a complete and consistent system of doctrine in regard to God and man, the present world and the future life. Faith, in other words, is to be established by fortification, embattled and intrenched with banquette and parapet, scarp and ditch and counterscarp of iron-worded proof, defended on every side by solid syllogisms, and impregnable against all assaults of unbelief.

But concerning the attempt to conquer modern doubt by a system of dogmatic theology certain things must be remembered. The conditions of warfare change from age to age. The vast fortresses of solid stone, whose possession was once regarded as the security of nations, are not ranked so high as they were a hundred years ago. The earth-work, the rifled cannon, the iron-clad ship, the torpedo, have wrought great changes. Deductive logic is just as strong as it ever was, but somehow or other men are not as much impressed by it. Induction is the method of to-day; and that is a subtle, evasive, mobile method. It cannot be shut in by a ring of fortresses. Already the dogmatic systems in which the inductive method is ignored or subordinated (whether made long ago, or born yesterday and born old) are out of date. They are good for the men who are within them, but on the outside world they have no more effect than Windsor Castle would have in protecting England from a foreign invasion.

We feel sure that theology, in time, must and will vindicate its claim to be considered as an essential factor in the intellectual life of man by adapting itself to the changed conditions, and producing even mightier works by the new methods than those which it produced by the old. Already we see the promise of a renaissance of dogmatics in such books as Mulford's "The Republic of God," Harris's "The Self-Revelation of God," Orr's "The Christian View of God and the World," and Fairbairn's "The Place of Christ in Modern Theology." But we must remember that even those who anticipate and predict this reconstruction of the old truth on the new lines recognize that it must be a long and difficult task, and that the man who is to be a master-builder must have a magnificent equipment. How exhilarating at the first sight, but at the second sight how overwhelming and discouraging, are the demands of the age upon him who would fain be an epoch-making theologian, as they are stated, for example, in Mr. Balfour's "Foundations of Belief," or in Dr. George A. Gordon's inspiring book "The Christ of To-Day"! Truly it appears that such a man must realize the supposition of St.

¹ The first of these Lectures, "An Age of Doubt," will be found in The Outlook for May 9. The Outlook will publish in following issues two other lectures in this course—"The Unveiling of the Father" and "The Human Life of God."

² Max Nordau, "Degeneration" (New York, 1895), p. 542.

¹ "A Defense of Philosophic Doubt" (Macmillan, 1879), pp. 284, 285, 287-289.

² 1 Chron. xi., 23.

Paul: he must speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge. Who is sufficient for these things? It will take a long time for the best of us to learn all this. Perhaps the most of us may never get so far. Meantime we need something divinely simple and divinely true that we can preach at once, directly, joyfully, fervently, to the heart of the age.

A STARTING-POINT FOR FAITH THE FIRST NECESSITY

A view of the world, a *Weltanschauung*, is desirable, perhaps in the long run necessary, for the mind of man; but there is another thing which is more desirable and of prior necessity, and that is a standpoint of practical conviction from which to obtain such a view. It may be but a foothold, only a single point of contact, but we must have it, and it must be solid as a fact. A complete and consistent theology is a consummation most devoutly to be wished for; but before it can come there must be something else—a living, active power of faith in the soul. This power, as we believe, already exists in every human being. But there is only one thing that can awaken it and call it into action, and that is a gospel, a message clear as light, which in its very essence is a force to quicken and stir the soul.

We look out upon the world and we see that some men have had such a gospel without being in any sense finished and systematic theologians. St. Paul and St. Peter and St. John had it. St. Chrysostom and St. Francis of Assisi and Savonarola had it. John Wesley and George Whitefield had it. In different ages and under different conditions these preachers had the primal message which moves men to believe. And in our own age, under our own conditions, a like message has been proclaimed with power. Père Lacordaire preached such a message in Notre Dame, and Canon Liddon in St. Paul's, to listening thousands. Phillips Brooks made it thrill like a celestial music through the young manhood of America; and Dwight L. Moody has spoken it with vigorous directness in every great city that knows the English tongue. In many things, in ecclesiastical relation, in theological statement, in dress, in manner, in language, these preachers are unlike. One thing only is the same in all of them, and that is the source of their power. Their central message, the core of their preaching, is the piercing, moving, personal Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God and Saviour of mankind. This, in its simplest form; this, in its clearest expression; this presentation of a person to persons, in order that they may first know, and then love and trust and follow him—this is pre-eminently the Gospel for an age of doubt.

I.—The Gospel of Christ

The adaptation of our central message, thus conceived and thus expressed, to meet the peculiar needs of a time of general skepticism, is the theme of this lecture. I do not say that this is the whole of Christianity. I do not say that when the preacher has delivered this message in this form he has fulfilled all of his duties. He may have to bear testimony against errors of thought and vices of conduct; he is certainly bound to give encouragement and guidance to new efforts of virtue and new enterprises of benevolence in every field. But his first and greatest duty, the discharge of which is to give him influence over doubting hearts and strength for all his other work, is simply to preach Christ.

THE GOSPEL OF A FACT

This gospel meets the needs of the present time because it is the gospel of a person, and therefore a gospel of fact.

Personality is a fact. Indeed, we may say that it is the aboriginal fact; the source of all perception; the starting-point of all thought; the informing and molding principle of all language.

Moreover, it is not only true that the recognition of our own personality lies at the root of perception and reasoning. It is also true that contact with other personalities, conscious, intelligent, free, and persistent like ourselves, is the gateway through which we reach the reality of all external things. To a solitary mind the outward world may be only a dream. But the moment two minds come into contact and communication it becomes at least a permanent possibility of sensation. By comparison and contrast with the sensations and experiences of others we verify our own. . . .

Persons, then, are the most real and substantial objects of our knowledge. They touch us at more points, they affect us in more ways and with greater intensity, they fit more closely into the faculties and powers of our own being, than anything else in the universe. A person who has influenced us or our fellow-men leaves a more profound, positive, permanent, and real impression than any other fact whatsoever. We live as persons in a world of persons, far more truly than we live in a world of phenomena or laws or ideas.

Now, in an age that is characterized, as some German writer has said, by "a hunger for facts," the gospel of a person, if it is rightly

apprehended and preached, ought to have peculiar power, because it is a factual gospel. We can come to those who are under the benumbing spell of universal doubt and say: Here is a fact, a personality, real and imperishable. It is not merely something that happened in Palestine eighteen hundred years ago. It is some one who lived. It is not merely a theory of God and the soul and the future life that sprang up in the East in the first century and has strangely spread itself over the world. It is a person who was born and lived and died among men. It is historical in its antecedents, in itself, and in its realization. The person of Jesus Christ stands solid in the history of man. He is, indeed, more substantial, more abiding in human apprehension, than any form of matter or any mode of force. The conceptions of earth and air and fire and water change and melt around him, as the clouds melt and change around an everlasting mountain peak. All attempts to resolve him into a myth, a legend, an idea—and hundreds of such attempts have been made—have drifted over the enduring reality of his character and left not a rack behind. The result of all criticism, the final verdict of enlightened common sense, is that Christ is historical. He is such a person as men could not have imagined if they would, and would not have imagined if they could. He is neither Greek myth nor Hebrew legend. The artist capable of fashioning Him did not exist, nor could he have found the materials. A non-existent Christianity did not spring out of the air and create a Christ. A real Christ appeared in the world and created Christianity. This is what we mean by the gospel of a fact.

II.—The Gospel of a Force

And here we come at once into sight of the second quality of this gospel which is peculiarly fitted to meet the needs of a doubting age.

If it be true that a person is a fact, it is no less true that a person is a force. The world moves by personality. All the great currents of history have flowed from persons. Organization is powerful; but no organization has ever accomplished anything until a person has stood at the center of it and filled it with his thought, with his life. Truth is mighty and must prevail. But it never does prevail actually until it gets itself embodied, incarnated, in a personality. Christianity has an organization. Christianity has a doctrine. But the force of Christianity, that which made it move and lent it power to move the world, is the person at the heart of it, who gives vitality to the organization and reality to the doctrine. All the abstract truths of Christianity might have come into the world in another form—nay, the substance of these truths did actually come into the world, dimly and partially, through the fragmentary religions of the nations, more clearly and with increasing prophetic light through the inspired Scriptures of the Hebrews; but still the world would not stir, still the truth could not make itself felt as a universal force in the life of humanity, until

The Word had breath, and wrought
With human hands the creed of creeds,
In loveliness of perfect deeds,
More strong than all poetic thought.¹

I think we must get back, in our conception of Christianity and in our preaching of it, to this primary position. The fount and origin of its power was, and continued to be, and still is, the Person Christ.

This was the secret of his ministry. He himself was the central word of his own preaching. He offered himself to the world as the solution of its difficulties and the source of a new life. He asked men simply to believe in him, to love him, to follow him. He called the self-righteous to humble themselves to his correction, the sinful to confide in his forgiveness, the doubting to trust his assurance, and the believing to accept his guidance into fuller light.² To those who became his disciples he gave doctrine and instruction in many things. But to those who were not yet his disciples, to the world, he offered first of all himself—not a doctrine, not a plan of life, but a living Person. This was the substance of his first sermon when he stood up in the synagogue at Nazareth, and, having read from the book of Isaiah the prophecy of the Great Liberator, declared unto the people, "This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears."³ This was the attraction of his universal invitation, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."⁴ This was the heart of his summary of his completed work when he said, "I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me."⁵

CHRIST WAS HIS OWN GOSPEL

We are not considering, at this moment, the tremendous implications of such a personal self-assertion, unparalleled, I believe, in the founder of any other religion. We pass by for the present that famous and inevitable alternative, *Aut Christus Deus, aut homo non bonus est*. The point, now, is simply this. As a matter of history, setting aside

¹ Tennyson, "In Memoriam," xxxvi.

² Henry Latham, "Pastor Pastorum" (James Pott & Co., New York, 1891), pp. 273-275.

³ St. Luke iv., 16-21.

⁴ St. Matt. xi., 28.

⁵ St. John xii., 32.

all question of the divine inspiration and authority of the Gospels, taking them merely as a trustworthy reflection of a certain sequence of events, it is plain that the force which started the religion of Jesus was the person Jesus. Christ was his own Christianity. Christ was the core of his own gospel.¹

Read on through the other books of the New Testament, the Acts and the Epistles, and you will see that they are just the record of the operation of this force in life and literature. It was this that sent the Apostles out into the world, reluctantly and hesitatingly at first, then joyfully and triumphantly, like men driven by an irresistible impulse. It was the manifestation of Christ that converted them,² the love of Christ that constrained them,³ the power of Christ that impelled them.⁴ He was their certainty⁵ and their strength.⁶ He was their peace⁷ and their hope.⁸ For Christ they labored and suffered;⁹ in Christ they gloried;¹⁰ for Christ's sake they lived and died.¹¹ They felt and they declared that the life that was in them was His life.¹² They were confident that they could do all things through Christ which strengthened them.¹³ The officers of the Church—apostle, bishop, deacon, evangelist—call them by what names you will—were simply forms of service to Him as Master;¹⁴ the doctrines of the Church were simply unfoldings of what she had received from Him as Teacher;¹⁵ the worship of the Church, as distinguished from that of the Jewish Synagogue and the Heathen Temple, was the adoration of Christ as Lord.¹⁶

Now, it was precisely this relation of the early Church in her organization and doctrine and worship to the person Christ, held fast in her memory as identical with the real Jesus who was born in Bethlehem and crucified on Calvary, conceived in her faith as still living and present with his disciples—it was this personal animation of the Church by Christ that gave her influence over men. Contrary to all human probability, against the prejudice of the Hebrews who abhorred the name of a crucified man, against the prejudice of the Greeks and Romans who despised the name of a common Jew, she made her way, not by concealing, but by exalting and glorifying, the name of Jesus Christ. Indeed, it seems as if her career of conquest was actually delayed until that name was taken up and written upon her banners. It was in Antioch, where the disciples were first called Christians,¹⁷ that the missionary enterprise of the Church began, and it was from that center, with that title, that she went out to her triumph.

THE PERSONAL INFLUENCE OF CHRIST

When we turn to follow the history of Christianity through the later centuries down to the present time, we see that the same thing is true. The temporal power of the Bishop of Rome doubtless grew out of the union of the Church with the Empire. The immense wealth and secular authority of ecclesiastics may be traced to social and political causes. But the inward, vitalizing, self-propagating power of Christianity as a religion has always come from the person of Jesus, who stands at the heart of it. The attraction of its hymns and psalms and spiritual songs, the beauty of its holy days and solemn ceremonies, were derived from Him who is the central figure in praise and prayer. The renaissance of Christian art sprang from the desire to picture to the imagination the visible, adorable form and life of Him whom speculative theology had so often concealed or obscured. The penetrating and abiding fragrance of Christian literature resides in those books, like "The Imitation of Christ," in which the sweetness of his character is embalmed forever. The potency of Christian preaching comes from, and is measured by, the clearness of the light which it throws upon the personality of Jesus. . . . Turn to the work which the Church is doing to-day in the lowest and darkest fields of human life, among the submerged classes of our great cities, among the sunken races of heathendom, and you cannot deny that the force of that work to enlighten and uplift still depends upon the simplicity and reality with which it reveals the person of Jesus to the hearts of men. Christianity as a missionary religion would be fatally crippled if you took out of it the old, old story of Jesus and his love.

"Mr. Darwin," says Admiral Sir James Sullivan, "had often expressed to me his conviction that it was utterly useless to send missionaries to such a set of savages as the Fuegians, probably the very lowest of the human race. I had always replied that I did not believe any human beings existed too low to comprehend the simple message of the Gospel of Christ. After many years he wrote to me that the recent account of the mission showed that he had been wrong and I

right, . . . and he requested me to forward to the Society an inclosed check for £5, as a testimony of his interest in their good work."¹

Observe, we are not constructing an argument. We are only tracing a force. The more closely, the more powerfully we can feel it in ourselves and in others, the more confidently we can come to a doubting age and say: Here is this force, intense, persistent, far-reaching. It has moved all kinds of men, from the highest to the lowest. What do you make of it? What will you do with it? Is it not the only thing that can lift and move you out of your doubt? For skepticism is just the inertia of the soul which stands poised between contrary and mutually destructive theories. From that state of impotence there is but one deliverance, and that is by force, the force of life embodied in a person.

III.—The Gospel of a Spiritual Reality

But the force which operates in the person of Jesus is not mere power, blind and purposeless. It moves always in a certain direction. It has a quality in it which produces certain results. And one of these results is an immediate and overwhelming sense of the reality and nearness of spiritual things. This is the third point of adaptation in the Gospel of the personal Christ to the needs of a skeptical age. It carries with itself an evidence of things not seen, a substance of things hoped for.

An aura of wonder and mystery surrounded Jesus of Nazareth in his earthly life. All who came in contact with him felt it; in love, if they desired to believe; in repulsion, if they hated to believe. In his presence faith in the invisible, in the soul, in the future life, in God, revived and unfolded with new bloom and color. In his presence hypocrisy was silenced and afraid, but sincere piety found a voice and prayed. This effluence of his character breathes from the whole record of his life. It was not merely what he said to men about the eternal verities that convinced them. It was something in himself, in his personal being as an objective reality, that made it easier for them to believe in their own spiritual nature and in the divine existence and presence. He drew out of their fallen and neglected hearts, by some celestial attraction, spontaneous, silent, irresistible, a new efflorescence of faith and hope and love. Where he came, a spiritual springtide flowed over the landscape of the inner life; blossoms appeared in the earth, and the time for the singing of birds was come.

Faith was not imposed on doubting hearts by an external and mechanical process. It grew in the warmth that streamed from him. It was not merely that men were at their best in his company—except, indeed, those who were at their worst through sullen resistance and malignant alarm at his power. It was that men were conscious of something far better than their best, a transcendent force, an influence from the unfathomable heights above them. And to withstand it they must sink below themselves, make new falsehoods and new negations to bind them down, grapple themselves more closely to the base, the earthly, the sensual. But if they yielded to that influence, it lifted and moved their thoughts inevitably upward. It was not merely what he told them of his own sight of spiritual things. It was what they saw reflected in his face and form of that loftier, wider outlook. He was like one standing on a high peak, reporting of the sunrise to men in the dark valley. They heard his words. But they also saw upon his countenance the glow of dawn, and dazzling all about him the incommunicable splendors of a new day.

Nor has this effect vanished from the world with the removal of the bodily presence of Jesus. It has perpetuated itself by its own vital power, increasing rather than diminishing. It still flows from the picture of his life which is preserved in the Gospels, from the image of his character as it is formed in the minds of men. Eliminate, if you please, what is called the miraculous element. Make what allowance you will for the enthusiasm and unguarded utterance of his disciples. There still remains that enthusiasm itself to be reckoned with—an enthusiasm which was kindled by him alone. There still remains the figure of the person of Christ, who never can be expressed in terms of matter and force, who never can be explained by natural and historical causes, who carries us by his own inherent mystery into the presence of the spiritual, the divine, the supernatural.

CHRIST UNIQUE

Something of this spiritual light, I will admit—nay, I will maintain with joyous and firm conviction—comes from every human personality, even the lowliest, in so far as it refuses to be summed up in terms of sense perception, in so far as it gives evidence by its affections and hopes and fears of something in man that is not of the dust. But in Christ this light is transcendent and unique because he manifestly surpasses the ordinary attainments of humanity, because he cannot be accounted for by the laws of heredity and environment.

¹ Alfred Barry, "Some Lights of Science on the Faith" Longmans, London, 1892, p. 116.

¹ The evidence for the historic character of the Gospels may be found summed up in its most modern form in Dr. Salmon's "Introduction to the New Testament," Fourth Edition, Young & Co., New York, 1889; in Bishop Lightfoot's Essays on "Supernatural Religion," Macmillan, 1889; in Beyschlag's "New Testament Theology," T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1895, pp. 29-31, 216-221 of Volume I; and in Professor George P. Fisher's "Grounds of Theistic and Christian Belief."

² Gal. i., 16.

³ 2 Cor. v., 14.

⁴ 2 Cor. xii., 9.

⁵ 2 Tim. i., 12.

⁶ 2 Tim. ii., 1.

⁷ Eph. ii., 14.

⁸ Col. i., 27.

⁹ Phil. iii., 8-10.

¹⁰ Gal. vi., 14.

¹¹ 2 Cor. iv., 4, 11.

¹² Gal. vi., 14.

¹³ Phil. iv., 13.

¹⁴ Eph. iv., 8-12.

¹⁵ 1 Cor. xi., 1, 23; xv., 3.

¹⁶ Phil. ii., 11; 1 Cor.

xii., 3.

¹⁷ Acts xi., 26.

The more closely we apply these laws the more clearly he shines out above them.¹

"The learned men of our day," says M. Pierre Loti in his latest book, "*La Galilée*," "have endeavored to find a human explanation of his mission, but they have not yet reached it. . . . Around him, none the less, there still glows a radiance of beams which cannot be comprehended."²

Historically he appears alone, as no great man has ever appeared before or since. Heroes, teachers, and leaders of men have always been seen as central stars in larger constellations, surrounded by lesser but kindred lights. Plato shines in conjunction with Socrates and Aristotle; Cæsar with Pompey and Crassus; Luther with Melancthon and Calvin; Shakespeare with Beaumont and Fletcher and Ben Jonson; Napoleon surrounded with his brilliant staff of marshals and diplomats; Wordsworth among the mild glories of the Lake poets. In every case, if you search the neighborhood of a great name, you will find, not a blank sky, but an encircling galaxy. But Jesus Christ stands in an immense solitude. Among the prophets who predicted him, among the Apostles who testified of him, there is none worthy to be compared or conjoined with him. It is as if the heavens were swept bare of stars; and suddenly, unexpected, unaccompanied, the light of lights appears alone, in supreme isolation.

Nor is there anything in his antecedents, in his surroundings, to explain his appearance and radiance. There was nothing in the soil of the sordid and narrow Jewish race to produce such an embodiment of pure and universal love.³ There was nothing in the atmosphere of that corrupt and sensual age to beget or foster such a character of stainless and complete virtue. Nor was his own life—I say it reverently—judged by purely human and natural laws, calculated to result in such an evident perfection as all men have wonderingly recognized in him. The highest type of human piety, the excellence of a beautiful soul, has never been reached among men without repentance and self-abasement. But Jesus never repented, never abased himself in shame and sorrow before God, never asked for pardon and mercy. Alone, among his followers who kneel at his command to confess their unworthiness and implore forgiveness, he stands upright and lifts a cloudless face to heaven in the inexplicable glory of piety without penitence. Moral perfection of this kind is not only without a parallel; it is also without an approach. Men have never attained to it, and there is no way for them to attain. We can only look up to it, serene, sinless, perfect in itself, and feel that here we are in sight of something which cannot be expressed except by saying that it is the glory of the eternal spirit embodied in a person.

IV.—The Gospel of One who Saves from Sin

But the force which resides in the person of Jesus is not exhausted in the production of this profound impression of its own spiritual and transcendent nature. It goes beyond this result of a vivid sense of the reality of the unseen. It has in itself a purifying, cleansing power, a delivering, uplifting, sanctifying power. The Gospel of Christ is the gospel of a person who has saved, and who does save, men from sin. And herein it comes very close to the heart of a doubting age.

The reality here, which can neither be questioned nor fully explained, is not involved in the theological speculations which have gathered about it. The person of Jesus stands out clear and simple as a powerful Saviour of sinful men and women. In his presence the publican and the harlot felt their hearts dissolve with I know not what unutterable rapture of forgiveness. At his word the heavy-laden were mysteriously loosed from the imponderable burden of past transgression. He suffered with sinners; and, even while he suffered, he delivered them from the sharpest of all pains, the pain of conscious and unpardoned evil. He died for sinners, according to his own word; and ever since, his cross has been the sign of rescue for humanity. Whatever may be the nature of that sublime transaction upon Calvary; whatever the name by which men call it, Atonement, Sacrifice, Redemption, Propitiation; whatever relations it may have to the eternal moral law and to the divine righteousness—its relation to the human heart is clear and simple. It does take away sin. Kneeling at that holy altar, the soul at once remembers most vividly, and confesses most humbly, and loses most entirely, all her guilt. A sense of deep, unutterable relief, a sacred quietude, diffuses itself through all the recesses of the troubled spirit. Looking unto Christ crucified, we receive an assurance of sin forgiven, which can neither be mistaken nor explained.

This is not theory, this is not philosophy, this is not theology. It is veritable fact. The person Jesus, living with men, dying for men, has actually made this impression of pardon for the past and hope for the future upon the heart of mankind. And from pure love of

him—a love which is first of all and most of all a sense of gratitude for this immeasurable service—have blossomed, often out of the very abysses of sin and degradation, the saintliest and sublimest lives that the world has ever seen.

Now, this, as I know from my own experience, is the gospel for doubting men, and for an age of doubt; the gospel of a person who is a fact and a force, an evidence of the unseen, and a Saviour from sin. Can we preach it? Will we preach it? Then certain things are necessary for us—things which might not be necessary, perhaps, if our message were of another kind.

All knowledge, of the world, of human nature, of books, will be helpful and tributary; all gifts, of clear thought, of powerful speech, of prudent action, will be valuable and should be cultivated; but certain things will be absolutely and forever indispensable.

THE ONE THING NEEDFUL TO KNOW CHRIST

If we are to preach Christ we must know Christ, and know him in such a sense that we can say with St. Paul that we are determined not to know anything save Jesus Christ and him crucified. We must study him in the record of his life until his character is more real and vivid to us than that of brother or friend. We must imagine him with ardent soul until his figure glows before our inward sight, and his words sound in our ears as a living voice. We must love with his love, and sorrow with his grief, and rejoice with his joy, and offer ourselves with his sacrifice, so truly, so intensely that we can say, as Paul said, that we are crucified by his cross and risen in his resurrection. We must trace the power of his life in the lives of our fellow-men, following and realizing his triumphs in souls redeemed and sins forgiven, until we know the rapture that thrilled the breast of a St. Bernard, a St. Francis, a Thomas à Kempis, a Samuel Rutherford, a Robert McCheyne; the chivalrous loyalty that animated a Henry Havelock, a Charles Kingsley, a Frederick Robertson, a Charles Gordon; the deep devotion that strengthened a David Brainerd, a Henry Martyn, a Coleridge Pattison. We must become the brothers of these men through brotherhood with Christ. We must kindle our hearts in communion with him by meditation, by prayer, and by service, which is the best kind of prayer. No day must pass in which we do not do something distinctly in Jesus' name, for Jesus' sake. We must go where he would go if he were on earth. We must try to do what he would do if he were still among men. And so, by our failure as well as by our effort, by the very contrast between our incompleteness and his perfection, the image of our Companion and our saving Lord will grow luminous and distinct within us. We shall know that potent attraction which his person has exercised upon the hearts of men, and we shall feel that overmastering sense of loyalty to him which one of our own poets has expressed in his "*Song of a Heathen Sojourning in Galilee, A.D. 32.*"

If Jesus Christ is a man—
And only a man—I say
That of all mankind I cleave to him,
And to him will I cleave away.

If Jesus Christ is a God—
And the only God—I swear
I will follow him through Heaven and Hell,
The earth, the sea, and the air.



A Hymn of Comfort

By the Rev. John W. Chadwick

It singeth low in every heart,
We hear it one and all;
A song of those who answer not,
However we may call.
They throng the silence of the breast,
We see them as of yore,—
The kind, the true, the brave, the sweet,
Who walk with us no more.

'Tis hard to take the burden up
When they have laid it down;
They brightened all the joy of life,
They softened every frown.
But, oh! 'tis good to think of them
When we are troubled sore;
Thanks be to God that such have been,
Although they are no more.

More homelike seems the vast unknown
Since they have entered there;
To follow them were not so hard,
Wherever they may fare;
They cannot be where God is not,
On any sea or shore;
Whate'er betides, Thy love abides,
Our God forevermore!

—Selected

¹ J. S. Mill, "*Essays on Religion*," p. 253.

² Pierre Loti, "*La Galilée*" (Paris, 1895), p. 93.

³ Amory H. Bradford, "*Heredity and Christian Problems*" (New York, Macmillan, 1895), p. 266.

The Religious World

The Methodist General Conference

From a Special Correspondent

The first week of the session of the General Conference held in the city of Cleveland has made an interesting chapter in the history of this important branch of the universal Church. At the very beginning it found itself face to face with a most perplexing question, namely, the eligibility of women to seats in this legislative body. Four women had been duly elected, and were present to take their places. The vote that had been taken during the past year by the annual conferences upon the admission of women into the General Conference was decided adversely by eighteen votes. The eligibility of elected women being challenged by Dr. J. M. Buckley, a committee of thirty was appointed to consider the whole question of woman's eligibility to a seat in the Conference. The committee presented a majority and minority report, twenty sustaining the eligibility of the women, and eleven denying the same. The majority report claimed that it was simply a question of interpreting the Constitution of the Church admitting laymen to the General Conference, citing the fact that such interpretation was made in regard to the relation of woman to official positions in the local church.

The minority report, as also a majority of the members of the Conference, insisted that the Constitution would have to be changed in order to admit women to the Conference. Many who favored the women as delegates nevertheless held to this view, as the only legal method of procedure in the case. Three days were consumed in the discussion of this subject, which was very able on both sides of the question, and resulted in a compromise report, in which the subject was referred back to the annual conferences to be voted upon during the next year. Before this decision was reached the women had resigned their seats, as they stated, in the interest of harmony. There seems to be no doubt that the vote next year will exceed the necessary three-fourths.

It is significant that the German conferences stood, in this country, 12 for and 597 against women, in Europe 80 against and none for. No other nation or race stood so solidly together on either side of the question. One of the speakers during the discussion remarked that "the Methodist that did not fall in with this movement for women will be like the Indian who lassoed the first locomotive he ever saw, which was also the last he saw."

The entire Conference seems jubilant over the amicable settlement of this vexed problem, which threatened to seriously disturb the peace of the Church. The Bishops' address, which is similar to the President's message to Congress, was read by Bishop Warren, and took two hours for its delivery. It was a very comprehensive and thorough presentation of the growth of the Church during the past four years, its present status, and the outlook for the future. It embodies many suggestions on important questions, and recommendations as to needed legislation. On the matter of Christian union the address "breathes a very fraternal spirit," as the following indicates:

We devoutly thank God, with you, that we are in the most friendly relations with all other Churches. We believe that the intense longing of the heart of Christ, as expressed in his great high-priestly prayer, "That they all may be one, as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us," is being fulfilled. Our message of love means oneness of spirit. Though there are differences of operation, it is the same God who worketh all in all. We have always practiced these four great elements of Christian unity:

1. A recognition and acceptance of the members of every Evangelical Church on the presentation of letters of membership; and a commendation of our own members to other Churches.
2. A cordial welcome of members of other Churches to the Holy Communion of their Lord as administered by us, and a glad going to the communion of our Lord as administered by them.
3. A free and cordial exchange of pulpits.
4. A practical co-operation with other Churches in all Christian work. Our ideal is not organic union of churches, but fraternal union of spirit. And this we believe to be the only unity known to the Apostolic and post-Apostolic Churches.

While we rejoice in these blessed fraternal relations with all Churches of Christ, we especially appreciate and reciprocate all evidences of Christian fellowship and co-operation from our sister Methodist Churches throughout the world.

In addition to the above, the Conference received the overtures of the Commission on Federation of the Methodist Episcopal Church South, with hearty unanimity, and appointed a like Commission to co-operate with their Southern brethren. This looks toward a closer relation between these two Churches in the future.

The Bishops exalt Christian citizenship as worthy of the highest aspiration of the Church. The following vigorous expression is found in their address: "A man may be as much a

missionary of God in the politics of America as in the wilds of Africa." On the present-day socialistic questions, the address was both Christian and democratic, as the following indicates:

In the progress of our liberties and the widening of our development we have come upon perils unknown in the earlier periods of our history. Classes are arrayed against each other, with mutual misunderstandings. A ripple has come upon our shores from the far-off tidal wave of the French Revolution, declaring that all property is theft, that men may be as much enslaved by law as by force, deprived of their rights by trusts and combines as by arms. In these misunderstandings, and it may be great wrongs, the Church must not be silent. It is her very nature to defend and care for the poor. Like her Master, the Spirit of the Lord God is upon her to preach the Gospel to the poor. Peculiarly is this true of our Church. It began its ministry to the wretched prisoners in Britain, continued it among the poor colliers, has always sought the sorrowing, wretched, wandering, and lost. It has never pandered to the rich nor been silent at injustice.

In this seething discussion concerning the rights of property we think these positions are grounded on justice and right:

1. Every man has a right to acquire property by the legitimate means of activity, foresight, invention, and inheritance.
2. No man has a right to use his possessions to oppress his fellow-men.
3. Every man has a right to the profit of his own labor. In that respect he is a capitalist.
4. No man has a right to use his labor to oppress his fellow-men.
5. Every free man has a right to refuse to work for another.
6. No man has a right to prevent another from working when, and for whom, he will.
7. Every man is accountable to God for the use of his time, labor, and their outcome, wealth.

Never in the history of the Church were the interests of the working masses pressed upon her attention as now. Many memorials from different parts of the country have been presented, among them one from the New York East Conference, which is a very strong plea for the rights of the oppressed, and calls upon the Church to give answer to the appeal of the wronged. The following are the recommendations of this memorial:

1. The duty of intelligent and discriminating sympathy with the discontent and the aspirations of the poor.
2. The maintenance of the right of property.
3. The need of just co-ordination between the rights of individuals and the welfare of society, in the regulation of the employment of both capital and labor.
4. The duties of property, and the ethical principles of business.
5. The danger of caste spirit and plutocratic influence in the Church.
6. The duty of the Church, and especially of the ministry, to study the constitution and the needs of society, and intelligently to lead in the march of social reform.

While the organization of the Methodist Church is very generally regarded as one of the most perfect ecclesiastical machines in existence, there is, nevertheless, a strong demand for modification of many features of its government. The centralization of too great power is regarded as dangerous to the future of the Church. All legislative and judicial power is lodged in the General Conference, and all the executive power in the Board of Bishops. The sentiment is freely expressed that the government should be more largely democratic, granting larger liberty and power to the annual conferences and the local churches, the Conference having some of the home rule enjoyed by the Presbyterian Church in her Presbyteries, and the local church having an autonomy of its own similar to the Congregational churches—a form of government somewhat after the model of our Federal Nation, giving the States and municipalities the right, in all local affairs, to govern themselves, while federal authority is not impeached. It is in reality the old question of Americanism—home rule as against a too strongly centralized government. The General Conference has power to change or annul, with few exceptions, the whole Book of Discipline. Dr. Townsend, in his address in Chicago April 28, indicated some of the questions that were up before the Church at large for consideration for the modification of the polity of the Methodist Episcopal Church:

Shall our laymen be admitted to the annual conference, and shall they have a more decisive voice in the General Conference?

Shall our stewards be elected by the assembled brotherhood of the laity, instead of being a self-perpetuating body whose election depends on the nomination of the pastor?

Shall our presiding elders be elected by the annual conference instead of being appointed by the Bishops?

Shall the arbitrary time-limit that often embarrasses the appointing power, the preacher, and the churches, be modified or removed?

Shall the undemocratic and disregarded rule forbidding negotiations between preachers and people as to appointments be enforced or abrogated?

Shall our discipline, without specifying certain prohibitions, leave all questions of casuistry, excepting, of course, any form of immorality, to the individual conscience of the members?

Shall the management of the secular and business enterprise of the Church continue in the hands of the ministers instead of being open equally to laymen who have business education and experience?

Shall the women of Methodism be permitted to exercise Church rights not yet recognized by the General Conference?

There is no denying that the progressive leading spirits of Methodism are demanding a more democratic government, with as much reason for it as the advanced Presbyterians desire