

THE GOSPEL FOR AN AGE OF DOUBT

BY

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*SIXTH EDITION REVISED
WITH A NEW PREFACE*

*"But if any speak not concerning Jesus Christ,
I look upon them as tombstones and sepulchres
of the dead, on which are written only the
names of men."*

ST. IGNATIUS, Epist. ad Phil.

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PREFACE

TO THE SIXTH EDITION

Two years have passed since this book was first printed. A new edition is now prepared for popular use by leaving out the appendix and making the volume smaller.

In writing a new preface, I am glad of the opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to the many friends who have given the book a welcome in different parts of the world, and have translated its message into other languages. I wish to acknowledge also the benefit received from those intelligent critics who have pointed out some of its faults and shortcomings, and to make some brief reply to those other critics who have misconceived its purpose and misrepresented its meaning. But most of all I would like to say a word to make the spirit and aim of the book more clear, and so to bring it into touch with the personal life of those into whose hands it may fall.

It was written in the form of a course of lectures on preaching, on the "Lyman Beecher

Foundation," and delivered before the divinity students of Yale University. But the aim of these lectures was not to teach the art of making sermons. It was to accentuate the truth that the question, What to preach, comes first, and the question, How to preach, comes afterwards. A man must have a distinct message, clear and luminous to his own soul, — a message which comes to him with a joyful sense of newness and demands utterance, — he must feel the living fitness of this precise message to the needs of the world, before he can learn to deliver it with freedom and power.

The study of theology as a science is a very important study. The training of men in the art of preaching is a very valuable discipline. But the vital experience of faith is deeper and broader than the theories of theology. The art of preaching is worth little unless it serves to enrich and ennoble the larger art of living. Religion is the secret of this larger art of living. And the power of religion to inspire and guide men to purer, stronger, happier, more beautiful lives, does not depend upon the modes and forms in which it is preached, but simply upon the concrete gospel, the good news about God and the world, which it brings into their hearts.

The audience in the Yale chapel appealed to me less as students of theology, than as young men with a life to live and a work to do in the modern world, in the present age. Around them I felt the pressure of those great, mysterious forces which are silently changing the current of human thought and the face of human society. Behind them I saw the wider circle of the young men and women of the new generation, the children of this age, born into the turmoil and confusion, the intellectual stress and storm, of a period of transition. It was to this wider circle that I really wanted to speak, through the divinity students who composed the immediate audience. I wanted to tell the men who were studying for the ministry that they must not let themselves be educated out of sympathy with the modern world; that they must understand the trials and difficulties of the present age in order to serve it effectively; that they must keep in touch with living men and women, outside of the circle of faith as well as within it, if they wished to help them.

But more than this. I wanted to show that there is a message of religion especially fitted to meet the needs of our times. There is an aspect of Christianity which comes to the world to-day as glad tidings. There is a newness in

the old gospel which shines out like a sunrise upon the darkness and despondency that overshadow so much of modern life. This aspect of Christianity centres in the person of Jesus Christ, as the human life of God. This newness of the gospel lies in believing in Him as a real man, in whose sonship the Fatherhood of God is revealed and made certain to all men. And the power of this message to enrich and ennoble life lies in the fact that those who receive it are set free from a threefold bondage : first, from the heavy thought that they are creatures of necessity whose actions and destiny are determined by heredity and environment ; second, from the haunting fear that the world is governed by blind chance or brute force ; and third, from the curse of sin, which is selfishness. To see Christ as the true Son of God and the brother of all men, is to be sure that the soul is free, and that God is good, and that the end of life is noble service.

This is the message that I wanted to deliver in this book, as the true gospel for an age of doubt.

The title has been misunderstood by some of the critics who have read it, apparently without going any further into the book. They have

taken it as if it were an arraignment of the present age for irreligion and infidelity. They have resented it as if it were a confession of the decline of Christianity. They have found fault with the writer for a want of sympathy with the intellectual perplexities of the men and women of to-day, and a lack of insight into their spiritual life and moral purposes.

It seems strange that any one should make such a criticism. The answer to it may be found in the first chapter, where I have tried to draw the distinction between doubt and infidelity. But in order that there may be no room for mistake, I will say what I mean again, and yet more clearly.

In calling the present "an age of doubt," I do not mean that it is the only age in which doubt has been prevalent, nor that doubt is the only characteristic of the age. I mean simply that it is one of those periods of human history in which the sudden expansion of knowledge and the breaking-up of ancient moulds of thought have produced a profound and widespread feeling of uncertainty in regard to the subject of religion. The remarkable achievements of the critical method as applied to philosophy, history, and literature, have led men to ask whether it may not be applied in

the same way to theology, and to take it for granted that the result must be destructive. The difficulty of adjusting the new discoveries of science to the established forms of theological doctrine, has produced in some reluctant and irritable minds a disposition to resent all scientific research, and to denounce it as atheistic. But in a far greater number of minds it has begotten a misgiving, that if religion needs to defend itself by denying facts it must stand on a very insecure foundation. There is a large class of people, thoughtful, earnest, sincere, who live under the shadow of this misgiving. They want religion. They are attracted by its spiritual ideals, by its moral inspiration. But they hesitate to accept it, at least in its Christian form, for fear that it may not be reasonable. The questioning temper holds possession of their minds. Their attitude toward religious things is interrogative. The secular spirit insensibly gains dominion over their thoughts and feelings. They grow weary of asking questions which seem to find no answer. The influence of the great mass of popular literature in which religion is practically ignored, tends to foster the impression that it is a subject in regard to which certainty is neither necessary nor attain-

able. The existence of God, the reality of the soul, the prospect of immortality,—these appear like insoluble problems to many of the children of this age. They are troubled and depressed and impoverished by the want of faith, but they accept indecision as the only rational attitude, and try to do the best that they can without believing in

“The truths that never can be proved.”

This is what I mean by an age of doubt. Who that knows the young men and women of to-day, can deny that multitudes of the very best of them are feeling the influence of this kind of doubt, and suffering under it? Who can fail to see that in many ways this kind of doubt is an evidence of spiritual sincerity, of moral earnestness, of a desire to be true to the truth at all costs? Who can forget that the sadness, the despondency, the pessimism of many of those who have surrendered faith at the call of what they conceived to be an intellectual duty, is in itself a proof that religion is necessary to complete human life and make the world endurable?

This is a doubting age. But it is not therefore an age to be despised or despaired of. It is a hopeful age, an earnest age, an age of gen-

erous feeling and noble action. What it needs is a clear answer to its doubt, and a powerful remedy for its sadness. This answer and this remedy are found in the person of Jesus Christ. His life is a fact which cannot be explained without God. His character is a standing proof of the reality of the spiritual world. A universe of matter and force could never have produced such a person. His teaching is a direct witness to things which are unseen and eternal. Those who will receive it shall find His words a fountain of living waters springing up within them unto everlasting life.

It is not to be supposed that any one can write or speak so as to make everybody perceive and accept this truth. All human preaching comes far short of the fulness of the gospel. Even while Christ was on earth there were many who doubted, and held fast to their doubts. But I am sure that the most helpful, the most convincing message for a doubtful age is that which centres in His person, and seeks to make Him evident as the final and immutable revelation of God.

That is what this book tries to do. It is in fact nothing more than an endeavour to prove these two things: Christ is a real person; Christ is God manifest in the flesh.

But it differs from other arguments for the Divinity of Christ in at least one point. It accepts without reserve or qualification the perfect humanity of Christ. The chapter in which this view of the person of Jesus is expressed has been criticised as dangerous. I cannot alter it, because it represents my most profound convictions. To me it seems not dangerous, but safe, — far more safe, indeed, than any other view, because it corresponds more closely with the facts. The life which Christ lived on earth was a veritable human life. The person who lived it was the Son of God. But in order to live that human life He had to become man, not in a dramatic sense, but actually and entirely. There were not two wills and two minds working within the person of Jesus. The mind that was in Christ was a single mind, and His will was the expression of an undivided personality. He was subject to ignorance, to limitation, to weakness, to temptation, even as we are. The only point of difference between Him and us is that we sin, but He sinned not. The Godhood that was in Him was such as manhood is capable of receiving. There is no evidence in His life or in His character of the omniscience and omnipresence and omnipotence that would have separated

Him from us. His existence among men was simply the human life of God.

It seems to me that this is the view of Christ which is given in the New Testament. I have tried to express it clearly, because it opens the way to the dissolving of many doubts, and makes His Divinity at once easier to be believed, in and more precious in its significance. And if it does this for one reader who has been troubled by unbelief in the Divinity of Christ, if it shows one seeker after God how to find Him in the man Christ Jesus, the chief purpose of the book will be accomplished.

The same considerations and desires have controlled my treatment of the doctrines of foreordination, sovereignty, and election. There has been no intention to enter into theological controversy. Indeed, if I had intended to do this, the report of the critics upon the result would fill me with curious confusion. For they seem to be unable to decide upon which side of the controversy the book is to be reckoned. One of them calls it "a violent and unfair attack upon Calvinism"; another says that "it presents the doctrines of the Westminster Confession so winningly that they are accepted almost before they are recognized."

The compliment and the reproach are alike undeserved. In point of fact I was not thinking at all of Calvinism or of the Westminster Confession, but only of the New Testament, and of how directly it meets the wants of our age with the liberating teachings of Christ. Nothing has been more effective in begetting and increasing doubts than the idea that Christian doctrine required us to believe that all events, good and evil, were foreordained by God, and that some men were eternally chosen to be saved, without regard to their faith or works, while all the rest were left to inevitable destruction. There is no trace of such an idea in the mind of Christ. On the contrary, He is the great liberator of men from the bondage of fatalism, and His invitation to all the weary and heavy-laden to come unto Him is a divine assurance that whosoever will may have everlasting life.

After years of doubt and inward conflict I have arrived at great peace and comfort in the unreserved acceptance of these teachings of Jesus. I do not believe that all things that happen are determined beforehand. The soul is free. The evil that men do is all their own; God has not foreordained it. His only predestination is to good, and if men will accept

their divine destiny, God will help them to fulfil it. Election is not the arbitrary choice of a few to receive blessings from which the many are excluded. It is the selection of certain races and men to receive great privileges to fit them for the service of all mankind in the divine kingdom. This is my faith in regard to these questions. I have made no secret of it. The recent agitation concerning ministerial honour in creed subscription seemed to require that it should be frankly confessed. If such a faith were inconsistent with any ecclesiastical obligations, I should be prompt to renounce them. But it is evident that there is no inconsistency. A man may hold this faith and preach it, as a loyal Christian, in the fellowship of the Presbyterian Church.

It remains only to add a word of explanation in regard to a criticism of this book which goes deeper than any of those of which I have spoken. A writer, for whose opinion I have great respect, has said that the volume does not give due place and proportion to the truth of the Atonement; that it fails to set forth Christ as "the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world."

If this were altogether true, I should be very

sorry. I certainly believe that Christ is the only Saviour of sinners; that He died to redeem men from the curse of sin, and that the attraction of His cross is most potent upon the human heart. I have tried to say this very distinctly in the second chapter and at the close of the fourth chapter.

But that the criticism is partly true I must admit. The Atonement does not appear in its due place and proportion in this book. It would not have been possible without prolonging the volume to a much greater length and turning aside from the purpose for which it was written. It was not intended to be a complete statement of Christian truth. It was meant only to present that aspect of the gospel which seemed to be especially adapted to the wants of an age of doubt. I was thinking of the men and women whose minds are confused and troubled by modern speculations, who are oppressed by the intellectual difficulties of belief, who feel the benumbing influence of the secular spirit, and who stand sadly in doubt in regard to the reality of the whole spiritual life. I wanted to say something to help them, something to make it easier for them to believe in Christ, and, through Christ, in God.

I know very well that it is not enough for

men to be delivered from doubt. They need also to be saved from sin. But before this can have any meaning to them they must begin to believe in a Divine Being and in their own spiritual relationship to Him. What does sin mean to a man who doubts whether there is a personal God, and thinks that his soul may be only a name for a certain secretion of the gray matter in his brain, and has no sure expectation of a life beyond death? What he needs first of all is a gospel which will bring him news of a real spiritual world, a gospel whose simplicity and directness and personal force will make the first adventure of faith possible. It was of such men as this that I was thinking, when this book was written.

I know very well that the book is incomplete. It touches only one aspect of the greatest of all subjects. It needs a sequel, to make it harmonize more fully with the truth as it is in Jesus, and to bring it into touch with another side of the need of humanity. Very soon, I hope to be permitted to follow this volume on "The Gospel for an Age of Doubt," with another, on "The Gospel for a World of Sin."

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