

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

THE REDISCOVERY OF CHRISTIANITY

E. C. GORDON
ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

A CONSIDERABLE number of modern thinkers and writers assert their rediscovery of Christianity. They make themselves conspicuous in books, magazines, and newspapers. They claim much credit for their efforts to get the Church back to what they allege is the true, the primitive, Christianity. This rediscovered Christianity is characterized by two chief features: its mission is the reconstruction of human society in accordance with genuine Christian principles; its chief concern is with right living in this present world rather than for any special regard for what is called "other-worldliness," or for a future life.

In view of these claims as to this rediscovery of Christianity, it may be worth while to inquire respecting the origin, rise, and characteristic features of the Christian religion as it appears in the New Testament Scriptures. It is admitted that Christianity is the outcome, the flower and fruit, of the religion of Israel as revealed to that people by Moses and the prophets in the Old Testament; but this phase of the subject will not be considered in the following discussion, the object of which is to show that true, primitive, Christianity, though it has been at times and places misunderstood and misrepresented, has never been wholly lost; that it has always been known, accepted, and confessed in some portions of the Church; and, therefore, has no need of rediscovery.

An intelligent Christian, without some knowledge of the literary and historical criticism of the New Testament, would naturally get the impression that the four Gospels were the earliest portions of the New Testament; that Paul and others, to whom are ascribed other portions of that Testament, derived their knowledge of the facts, doctrines, and duties of the Christian religion from these Gospels. This is not the case. Paul's earlier letters, certainly those

to the Galatians and Thessalonians, were written before the Gospels attributed to Matthew, Mark, and Luke were circulated. It is also certain that neither Paul nor his earliest converts ever saw or heard of the Gospel according to John. Whatever knowledge they had of Jesus, his words and works, came to them by oral tradition, by personal and private letters, and by revelations coming to them directly from the glorified Jesus and from his promised Holy Spirit, who was to abide with them, teach them, "bring to their remembrance" whatsoever Jesus had taught them. Compare Mark xiii. 11; Matt. x. 19, 20; Luke xii. 11, 12, with John xiv. 16, 17, 26.

This promised gift of the Holy Spirit was prominent in the message of John the Baptist. He was the herald of the Giver; his baptism with water could neither heal nor save. Those who submitted to it must look to Another who was to come. That Other would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. John pointed out Jesus as the One who was to do this great thing, when he saw the Holy Spirit, in the likeness of a dove, descend upon him. A dove, the bird of sacrifice, revealed to John that Jesus, submitting to his baptism, was the lamb of God by whose sacrifice the sins of the world were to be taken away. This office of Jesus became the burden of the message which John passed on to his disciples. Jesus himself taught that, in order to baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, he must die at Jerusalem. More and more this necessary death occupied his mind and gave color to his teaching until it was accomplished. After he rose from the dead, he commanded his disciples not to depart from Jerusalem until his promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit was fulfilled and they were "clothed with power from on high" (Luke xxiv. 49).

This command was obeyed. The fulfillment of the promise is recorded in Acts ii. 1-36. The date of the fulfillment was about fifty days after the crucifixion. The record of the fulfillment, written by Luke after he had written the Gospel which bears his name, was sent forth not later than A.D. 66, in which year, approximately, Paul was put to

death at Rome. This coming of the Holy Spirit was an event of supreme importance. Up to this time, in the remarkable words of John's Gospel, "The Holy Spirit was not yet *given*; because Jesus was not yet glorified" (vii. 39). The meaning is that during Jesus' lifetime on earth, the Holy Spirit was practically non-existent within the experience of his disciples. They heard Jesus' words. They saw his miracles. They promised to die with him. When the test came, they all forsook him and fled. A robber and not an apostle accompanied him to Paradise from the Cross. But when the Holy Spirit came and clothed them with power they were willing both to live and to die for him. No wonder he said: "It is expedient for you that I go away; for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you" (John xvi. 7). After Pentecost the vacillating Simon becomes Peter, the Rock, who boldly proclaims to a gathered multitude of Jews in Jerusalem: "Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly, that God hath made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom ye crucified" (Acts ii. 36). As a result three thousand were converted and baptized, many of whom went forth to proclaim the gospel of the crucified, risen, and ascended Jesus in various parts of the Roman Empire. From this time on the Holy Spirit appears as the teacher, guide, and power, animating and directing the Church. No attentive reader of the New Testament can fail to observe the truth of this statement, which may be sustained by two lines of remark.

First. Jesus was by human birth a Jew. He was born, he lived, and was taught under the Jewish Dispensation. He said: "I was not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. xv. 24). His commands prior to his death to his apostles confined their work within the same limits (Matt. x. 5). His world-wide commission was not given until just before his ascension. The promise of his continued presence with them (Matt. xxviii. 18-20), manifestly found its fulfillment in the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Second. There is a remarkable advance in the teaching

of the apostles over that of Jesus himself as recorded in the first three Gospels. In these Gospels we find hints, intimations, of what is expanded and emphasized in the apostolic epistles. Some illustrations of this may here be noted.

1. There is an immense geographical and racial expansion. We have an intimation of this in the parable of the Householder and his Vineyard (Mark xii. 1-11; Matt. xxi. 33-43). When the time came for the realization of this hint, it found the apostles wholly unprepared. The infant Church had to pass through the throes of a new birth in order to accept and apply the truth that Gentiles could be saved and enter into full communion with the Church without passing through the door of Judaism. Peter must have a wonderful vision. The Holy Spirit must come with power directly on Gentile converts. A special command must come from the Holy Spirit, directing that Barnabas and Paul be sent to preach to Gentiles as well as Jews. A council must be held at Jerusalem, which, after much discussion, sees in this racial expansion a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy as well as a present call of the Holy Spirit. Out of this agony the Church emerged to proclaim a gospel applicable alike to Gentile and to Jew.

2. In opposition to the averments of our modern rediscoverers of Christianity, we may note that, while the teaching of Jesus is particularistic rather than social, this feature is distinctly expanded and emphasized by the apostles under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Jesus on a few occasions addressed multitudes or small groups of people. He healed individuals. He called individuals to his service. He taught individuals. He left Israel socially and politically as he found it. This individualistic feature is emphasized, so far as salvation is concerned, in the apostolic epistles. Salvation from sin, from spiritual depravity and death, restoration to eternal life, depends on the formation by the Holy Spirit of a personal, vital, union between individual men and women and Jesus Christ, in which union each believer shares in the death and the resurrection to life of the Saviour. For example, Paul

writes to the Romans: "Are ye ignorant that all we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him through baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with *him* in the likeness of his death, we shall be also *in the likeness* of his resurrection" (vi. 3-5). The reader may compare these statements with John iii. 3-7, 18-21; Col. ii. 12; 1 Peter iii. 21. If he will carefully observe these citations, he will be convinced that salvation from sin, as set forth in the New Testament, is personal and particular. Men and women are saved as individuals and not *en masse*, by means of personal union with Christ.

Here attention is called to the fact that, though this fundamental truth of Christianity, as it is taught in the apostolic writings, must have been well known to those who wrote the three Synoptic Gospels, it finds little mention and no emphasis in them. These Gospels present to us the essential facts as to Jesus' birth, life, teaching, miracles, death, resurrection and ascension. They record the promise to send the Holy Spirit who was to render his own work effective, and leave it as a promise. So, too, they must have been aware of the fulfillment of this promise, of the actual and wonderful expansion of the gospel outside of the pale of Judaism, yet of all this they make no mention. They tell us nothing of the coming abandonment of the Mosaic ritual, though they report Jesus' words: "Think not that I came to destroy the law or the prophets: I came not to destroy but to fulfill" (Matt. v. 17). They left it to the apostle John or some other to tell of the imperative need of a new birth; of a personal, vital, union with Jesus Christ in order to salvation. The question as to this reticence on the part of Matthew, Mark, and Luke is a puzzling one. It may be that they wrote at a time when the infant Church was face to face with all sorts of philosophic and mystical speculations, and drifting into an unhealthy spiritualism. The Holy Spirit under whose con-

trol they wrote found it most important to impress the Church thus in danger with the supreme fact that the Son of God was manifested in the flesh, had been seen, known, heard, followed, denied, put to death, and risen from the grave, as a Man.

3. Another feature of Christianity, as taught by Jesus and his apostles, which our rediscoverers of it propose to minimize or leave out, is the emphasis placed on "other-worldliness." As to this feature of the true gospel, Jesus, it must be admitted, is as emphatic as his apostles. It would be indeed difficult to add to the emphasis which he places on the doctrine of a future life with its eternal rewards and punishments. The reader may consult Matt. v. 22, 29, 30; x. 28; xxiii. 33; Mark ix. 43-48. In all these passages the word for "Hell" is not *Hades*, the place of the dead, but *Geenna*, the place of torment. According to Jesus, beyond the death of the body is the "soul" that lives forever; is the "worm" that never dies; is the "fire" that is never quenched. With these terrific words of our Lord, used to promote right living and well-doing in this life, agree what is written in such passages as 1 Thess. v. 1-10; Col. iii. 1-iv. 6; 1 Peter iv. 6-19, in which death in Christ's death, and a new and eternal life in him, are used to impress upon Christians the importance of a holy life here on earth, and the discharge of all relative duties as husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and servants. In all these features Christianity has never been lost and needs no rediscovery.

While in the teaching both of Jesus and his apostles we find this emphasis on individual salvation and the importance of using the present life in order to make preparation for a blessed future life, there is nothing to be found in the New Testament which teaches that any generation, or successive generations of mankind, will be saved *en masse*. Whatever social reforms are hinted at appear as "by-products," to be regarded, for the most part, as negligible. On the contrary, evil seducers are to increase in numbers and grow worse in character (2 Tim. iii. 13). The war

between the Serpent's Seed and the Woman's Seed, foretold in Gen. iii. 15, is to continue until Christ, the Head of the Woman's Seed, returns to the earth for his final triumph as foretold in Rev. xix. 11-xxii. 5. Meanwhile the age-long war continues to rage. The Woman's seed fights and suffers. Its divine Head is not exempt. Christianity is not dead, though its heel is bruised. As Jesus triumphed over the Devil in the wilderness, he will finally crush his head and reign in peace and righteousness in the new heaven and the new earth.

Christianity is often blamed for not preventing war. People forget that Jesus, according to the record, never uttered a word against war, and gave no commission to his Church to put an end to war. He knew, as his apostle Paul wrote to the Romans (xiii. 1-7), that God had placed the sword, the symbol of physical force, in the hand of the civil government to protect the good against the evil. He knew that his own teaching would intensify the war between the good and the evil. He himself twice used physical force to cleanse the Temple courts. There can be no peace on earth, universal and abiding, until our Lord returns in person; and the Devil, the apostate Church, and the world powers animated by the Devil, are all cast into the Lake of Fire (see Rev. xx. 10).

When we turn from the New Testament to the official utterances of the Church, we find this conclusion set forth with entire unanimity. The Creeds of all the great historical Churches confess faith in an individualistic salvation accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit, producing in men and women personal faith in the redeeming work of Christ, and repentance, issuing in a progressive sanctification. These creeds also teach the immortality of the individual souls of men, the personal return of Christ to judge the world, the eternal blessedness of the saints, and the eternal punishment of the wicked and unbelieving. For particulars as to the essential agreement between modern and ancient Christianity as to these features of a pure

Christianity the reader is referred to Dr. Philip Schaff's "Creeds of Christendom" (vol. i. pp. 920, 921).

This true Christianity has never been lost. It needs no rediscovery. What is needed is that men should cease to misunderstand and misrepresent it; that the Church itself should proclaim it in all the world and to every individual of mankind. Failure to comply fully with the last command of Jesus, and not a defective creed, is the great sin of the modern Church. A devout mind, and a renewed heart, staggers when it undertakes to imagine what the mind of the glorified Saviour thinks, and what his heart feels, when he looks down upon a thousand millions of immortal souls on earth who have never heard of him and his salvation. Surely this failure to comply with his last, his great, world-wide, commission, if it cannot reopen the wounds in his body, must excite the agony of his soul, and again bring to utterance those amazing words: "I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straightened till it be accomplished" (Luke xii. 50). The world may forget and neglect him. The disobedience of his own people to his last command crucifies him afresh. That command is not, "Come"; it is not, "Worship"; it is not, "Enjoy." It is, "Go"; "Disciple the nations"; "Baptize"; "Teach." It is enforced by his word: "Freely ye received, freely give" (Matt. x. 8). What the Church needs is not a new creed, a rediscovered Christianity; but a new heart. Its constant prayer should be: Oh Thou of the pierced hands and feet, give us thy mind.