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A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

What is a Christian?

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THERE is a stage in the religious interest when there is a peculiar fascination in the definition of what precisely constitutes religion in the individual: this paper is an attempt, if not at definition, at least at description of what constitutes personal religion in Christian men. I well remember the expectant interest with which I went in my student days to St. Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh, to hear Dr. Marcus Dods preach on 'What is a Christian?' I cannot now remember much of the sermon, but I do very vividly recall the reason for one's eager interest. In the preaching (at least the evangelistic preaching) of those days a very sharp distinction was drawn between those who are in the Kingdom and those who are without; and some of us young people (for whom it was hardly possible in the immaturity of our knowledge of life to feel that we had fully yielded to the vaguely conceived claims of God)—some of us went daily haunted by misgivings as to whether we really had or had not been 'received into the fold of Christ.' What precisely constituted a Christian,—what (I mean) in belief or surrender or personal habit or attitude,—was of vital interest to us. In the matter of these misgivings and anxieties the present generation is frankly a puzzle to me: I cannot make out how far such anxieties exist,—they are so veiled in 'theological difficulties' or by light-hearted demeanour. But I do not think there is less need than there used to be to arrive at a true idea of the essential contents of Christianhood. Let us try to get at the heart of the matter without technical language, and by way of description.

I take it, then, that in the broadest sense, the religious man is he who feels and owns the pressure of the moral and spiritual ideal upon him, and is endeavouring in some fashion to pay heed and respond to the pressure; and that the personal religion is *Christian* when the Ideal is conceived as Jesus Christ would have us conceive it. Now it is not difficult, I think, to recognize Jesus Christ's interpretation of the Ideal, at least in its main emphases. To begin with, that Ideal which from outside the visible order (in which we struggle for bread, for knowledge, for wealth, for recognition) makes itself felt within us as a moral Pressure and

Summons—this Jesus declared to be the presence of a Personal Being, to be identified with the Eternal Fount and Origin of our life and with what we call Providence. This Person works within us as Mind conveying His meaning to our minds in rational but uniquely intimate ways. That 'God' is *personal* as Father, and that He is *intimate* as Spirit, these together make the first of Christ's emphases in His interpretation of the moral and spiritual Summons we hear within us. Next, Jesus taught the all-embracing power of this spiritual Person whom we hear within. I do not know whether Jesus was a 'monist' or not: He certainly treated evil as a grim reality; but I am sure He so believed in the supremacy of God and in the universality of His interest as to hold firmly *the potential unity of all persons in Him*. Next, Jesus taught that this spiritual Presence is holy—holy beyond our thought; and, finally,—with most emphasis of all,—He taught that an unaltering Love dwells at the heart of this Urgency that is upon us, and that it is Love-in-sacrifice.

Now let us return to our question, 'What is a Christian?' It is obvious that if a Christian is one who endeavours to respond to the ideal *as Jesus conceived it*, we have in these 'emphases' of Jesus the leading 'notes' of the Christian life—Spiritual Personality, Unity, Infinite Holiness, and Love-in-sacrifice: these are the brief summaries of the Christian's distinctive aspirations.

Let me try in a sentence or two to make this clear. First, to the man who accepts Christ's rendering of the facts of the moral life, there is at the centre of his life, as its most sacred experience, a personal relationship of august obligations, and a personal spiritual action welcomed and valued above all else. Now to such a man, *persons will mean more than things*, and spiritual values more than material values. He will judge that a man's life consists not in what he possesses, but in the spirit which possesses him. The character of those he loves; loyalties in friendship; the maintenance in public and domestic life of clean motive and untarnished honour,—in a word, all that exalts the spiritual in personal life will interest and attract him most. Next, if Christ's emphasis on the

comprehensiveness of God's sphere of influence and on the potential unity of all persons in Him has laid hold of a man, *the expansion of that man's sympathy* is inevitable,—the passion for unity, the dread and hate of the exclusive spirit, will certainly take hold of him. He will become, as St. Ignatius, writing to the Philadelphians described himself, 'a man knit together for unity.' Again, the emphasis on the exalted height of God's holiness means for the Christian *infinitude of aspiration and infinitude of duty*. This is the basal paradox of the Christian life: it is haunted by the infinite,—by that which in the field of striving combines the stimulating and the hopeless. 'We are saved in hope.' And then, lastly, the emphasis on Love-in-sacrifice produces the most characteristic note of the Christian life,—it is *in love with sacrifice*. Christ taught that God's very life is love,—that He *is* Himself because He *gives* Himself: and the paradox is reproduced in the Christian. Only, that which God wholly is, the Christian only partly is. He knows that fullest life is in self-giving; but the spirit of self-indulgence struggles with the spirit of self-offering. And it is because of this inner contradiction and conflict that the attitude of

'dependence on Christ' is forced upon the Christian. One moment aspiring toward the infinite, the next yielding to self-indulging ease, he needs to cast himself on One who, being otherwise one with him, yet represents in permanence that which in him is but fugitive and intermittent. So the Christian escapes from himself in Christ. And if any one say that this is unreal, the Christian man answers, 'But what else can I do? I hear the summons of the infinitely holy God to be like Himself, and I astir to respond. But the weight dragging me back seems as great as the power that calls me to rise. I can do naught else than take refuge from the conflict in God Himself!'

I do not see, then, how the essentials of Christian personal religion can be reduced much further than to these four elements, with their discipline, their contradictions, their promise, and their present issue in the attitude of 'sheltering in Christ' of which our fathers had so much to say.

But I wonder how far that attitude of escape in Christ—how far the confessed paradox of being now alone with the Supreme, and now flying for refuge to a Mediator—is in our day experienced?

In the Study.

The Depreciation of the Priceless.

'It might have been sold' (Mk 14^b).

THE suggestion came from Judas. That was all he could find to say about the precious ointment poured forth from its alabaster vase in the service of love.

The picture is before us—the Bethany circle uniting to do honour to Jesus. The Master is in the place of honour. The disciples are near. Martha is waiting at table. Lazarus looks out on things with the light of his second life in his eyes. Mary, with the inner vision of a loving heart, reads in the Master's face a shadow of things to come. There is a hush in the talking. Mary kneels at the Master's feet; the vase is broken; the perfume floats through the room. A silence follows, a silence in which love eternal is trying to say something to each man's heart. Then, as is often the case in life, the first man to break the silence

is the man to whom the silence has said nothing. 'It might have been sold.'

It was bad taste, we say. Judas mishandled a beautiful situation. Judas took a business view of the scene, when he ought to have looked at it artistically.

It was more than bad taste. The real charge against Judas is, not that he took a business view, but that he got no view at all. If he sinned against art, it was not art as it is interpreted by the æsthetic temperament, with its not seldom false and uncatholic view of a workaday world, with its profound conviction that a man who paints pictures must be altogether superior to a man who makes boots—it was against art as it stands for the unpurchasable and imperishable and eternal—and that is the fabric of man's true life. That little pale-faced mite who stopped you in the street yesterday as you were carrying home a bunch of flowers to your wife, and said, 'Give me