
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

The Church's Interpretation of the Historic Christ.

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In a recent number of *The Expositor*,[1] Dr. Tennant gives a definition of 'interpretation': 'Interpretation means introduction of new categories or conceptions, advance to fuller thought, development.' The function of the Church in thus interpreting the historic Christ is one which it becomes increasingly important to examine. The forces at work, the nature of the process, and its results, all require to be ascertained and estimated so far as possible, in order to test the validity of the results. For it is along this line that we are to find the explanation and the justification of our confidence in the early Christian records.

That movement of last century, which in its popular form was known by the watchword 'Back to Christ,' has failed. By 'Christ' was meant the Jesus of the Gospels or the 'Christ of history'; and many motives, good and less good, combined to give the movement plausibility and force. It appealed to reverence for the central Figure in Christianity no less than to a craving for simplicity or an indolent shrinking from thought. It fell in with a general disinclination or distrust for what is called 'dogma' or 'theology.' The Christ to whom men were to go back was not the Christ of the Church, not even the Christ of the Epistles, but the Christ of the Gospels: and there it was supposed that every man could find Him for himself, and find Him as He was indeed, and not as He had been altered, or as some would say distorted, in the judgment of His followers. But it has landed those who followed it in a *cul de sac*. Its result is seen in that 'Bankruptcy of Liberal Christianity' which has been authoritatively proclaimed.

There are two reasons for this failure. In the first place, the Gospels themselves, when critically examined, fail to provide a consistent portrait of Christ. This is most readily seen when we compare the portrait drawn in the Synoptic Gospels with that of the Fourth Gospel. The widely divergent treatment of the cardinal question of the Messiahship and our Lord's relation to it is sufficient without any further illustration to show that in the Fourth Gospel we have something more than record, we have record and interpretation. And when once the presence of interpretation is recognized, it is difficult to reject the conclusion that the same influence has modified other features in the record: and one of the great unsolved problems of the New Testament is to ascertain (not the authorship of the Fourth Gospel, but) the proportionate relation between fact and interpretation, and the nature of the influences, intellectual and religious, which gave this interpretation to the facts.

We are thus thrown back on the Synoptic Gospels in our search for the Christ of history, but only to find ourselves confronted by the same problem in a subtler and more perplexing form. Minute comparison of the three again raises doubt as to whether we have a consistent portrait, and whether the differences which reveal themselves do not rest upon and reflect a certain interpretation of our Lord's person and work. To the present writer it appears that the process of discovering instances of this 'interpretation,' of reading back into the Synoptic Gospels what were really factors of later Christian consciousness, has been carried to an extravagant length. Many assertions of this kind are in flat defiance of the sound canon laid down by Weinel:[2] 'The only criterion for distinguishing the genuine from the non-genuine is this: only such features in the tradition are to be eliminated as non-genuine as *cannot* proceed from some interest of Jesus, but only from some interest of the Christian community.' The application of this principle undoubtedly secures as part of the genuine tradition not a few phrases and passages which are vital to a complete view of the Christ of history; nevertheless the possibility amounting to a certainty that some of the language, especially in the First and the Third Gospels, bears evidence of reflection and interpretation involves the conclusion that the Christ of history is not to be found simply by forming a composite portrait from the Synoptic Gospels.

A second reason for the failure of this movement is yet more serious. It is that when the field of

[1] *The Expositor*, 1913, ii. 143.

[2] Weinel, *Das liberale Jesusbild*, p. 30.

vision is thus deliberately narrowed to the Synoptic Gospels the figure which appears there, especially when justice is done to reasonable criticism, proves to be quite inadequate to account for what followed His removal from the plane of history. Fortunately for ourselves as human beings, but unfortunately for us if we would follow this movement to its severely logical issue, it is hardly possible for us to think away what ensued, or to dissociate it from what had taken place in Galilee and Jerusalem, the 'conquering new-born joy,' the breaking down of barriers of race and rank, the new moral ideal and the achievement of that ideal in no unworthy measure, the sudden exchange of pessimism for optimism in the outlook upon the future, the new fellowship with God, the assured victory over death, in a word, the Christian life and the Christian Church; these tremendous facts of history are left floating in the air when we have gone 'back to Christ' in the sense described, and found the Person who is left when criticism has had its way with the Gospels.

For the phrase meant not only back to something, but back from something else, namely, the interpretation put upon the facts of the Gospel by the followers of Jesus and in the most flagrant degree by St. Paul. Between Jesus and Paul there is, we are told, an 'unbridgeable chasm': and once the idea was started, it was not difficult to make out an increasingly strong case for the assertion by eliminating from the Gospels anything that they have in common with Paul, and by ignoring or undervaluing anything in Paul that reproduces the teaching or the spirit of Jesus. At the time when the reputation of the Acts as an historical document was at its nadir, it was possible to overlook the very important middle term between Jesus and Paul, namely, the infant Church, the contents of its consciousness and the witness of its faith. And now when the significance of that middle term can no longer be ignored, and much of what has previously been put down to the credit or the discredit of St. Paul is seen to be due to the experience of the infant Church, there is postulated a second chasm, one between Jesus and the infant Church; we are asked to believe that the movement which we have been in the habit of regarding as a continuous stream was within the first four or five years of its existence cut across by two 'unbridgeable chasms,' that it twice came to an end and twice made a new start. And yet the only sources of our information represent the movement as continuous.

The lesson of this blind-alley experience seems to be that we shall never rightly explain the Church or understand Christ so long as we insist on narrowing our vision so as to include only the Gospel records. And the reason for that is that these records, just because they are records, are at least one step removed from what was vitalizing at the time and is therefore vital to our understanding of the phenomena. It has long been recognized as a commonplace of criticism that certain features in the Gospels are due to a desire on the part of a later generation to enhance the glory or the dignity or the authority of Jesus: but it is at least equally true, and even more worth considering, that these same records suffer from the common human inability to find adequate expression for profound impressions of a moral or religious kind. That Jesus made an impression of this kind upon His disciples is capable of proof, were it not generally admitted. What is too often forgotten is that the records fall short of conveying the impression even more certainly than they in some cases add to what was contained in the experience of the moment.

We may take as an example St. Peter's 'confession' at Cæsarea Philippi. That is commonly regarded as the expression of a great act of faith in which the Apostle leapt to the height of a great conviction almost beyond his reach: 'Thou art the Christ.' It is quite as true to regard it as at the same time an expression quite inadequate to convey all of the inward convictions which intercourse with Jesus had wrought in Peter. Suddenly called upon to sum up and define the total impression which Jesus had made on himself and his fellow-disciples, Peter simply applied to Him the highest religious category he dared apply to a man. In other words, he interpreted Jesus in terms of the national Messianic hope. But it is not necessary to suppose that the expression was really adequate to his experience or exhaustive of it. There was a wide penumbra of personality with which the formal description failed to coincide, permanent impressions made by Jesus which found expression only when they had been fitted with a new form of thought.

Such forms of thought are called in to body forth those interpretations of Christ's teaching and of Christ Himself which we receive through St. Paul, St. Peter, and St. John, through the Acts and

Hebrews. Their content may have been added to by subsequent spiritual experiences, *i.e.* by subsequent impact of the Spirit of Christ on their spirits; but in any case the form is provided by new circumstances, by contact with new modes of thought, and by the necessity of relating to these the original experience. Such interpretation is not to be ruled out on *a priori* grounds, because it is interpretation: it may be of at least equal value with the record of actual words and deeds, for the testimony it bears to the unrecorded and unrecordable impression made on men by Christ.

How then are they to be tested? In the first place, they must be examined not only severally but conjointly. They bear joint as well as several witness to the impression made by Jesus. In the second place, specimen interpretations may be taken and compared with a view to ascertaining whether they show homogeneity among themselves, *i.e.* whether they sufficiently agree in character to be deducible from the same primary source and the product of the same creative forces. Thirdly, they may be examined to find whether they are harmonious with the personal quality which is felt rather than declared to underlie the narrative of the Gospels.

By way of illustration three cases may be taken in which the process of interpretation may be observed, namely, the Universality of the Gospel, Eschatology, and the Person of Christ. In regard to Universalism, the duty of the Church to proclaim the Gospel to the Gentiles, indeed to all the world, the privilege of the Gentiles to be 'fellow-heirs and fellow-partakers' with the Jews in the promises and the Kingdom of God, these were commonplaces of the Christian consciousness within a very few years after the Resurrection. The doubts and protests which make themselves heard on the part of Legalists only throw this fact into prominence. They proceeded from a section of the Church which, though tenacious, possibly vehement, in its opposition, represented a rapidly diminishing proportion soon to disappear. And yet the impression left by a merely superficial consideration of our Lord's teaching and ministry was by no means in favour of these views. He had set very definite limits to His own activities both in theory and in practice. He had enforced the like limitations on the missionary activities of the Twelve. And the Gospels show that the Church had not shrunk from preserving the record of such facts, however disparate from its own practice. On the other side there is, so far as categorical statement goes, only the great commission at the end of Matthew's Gospel, and that may be the reflection of later practice. All the difficulties with which we ourselves are confronted when we seek to harmonize the recorded words of Jesus bearing on this subject, first among themselves, and then with our conviction that His salvation is for all the world, must have confronted the first generation. It is not to be supposed that they solved the problem by the same method as we have done, by the application of intellectual considerations, by the recognition of Christ's place in a developing order of history which held universalism at its heart and had it for its goal, or by the recognition of the fact that our Lord dealt with man as man, with the Jew indeed but with the man in the Jew; that the limitations He placed upon His work were after all but surface ones, while His teaching and the new relation to God which He made possible for all men inevitably transcended the boundaries of nationality and privilege. Guided by such considerations as these, as well as by the experience of the intervening centuries, we are led to recognize the subtler indications beneath the surface of His recorded teaching which point in the same direction, and so to find there also justification for the Universalist practice and theory of the early Church. But in their case it was by no such process of reasoning that the result was arrived at. It was an interpretation of the mind of Christ, due in part to the unrecorded impression He had made upon His followers, in part to the discovery that the Gospel was the power of salvation to others outside the pale of Judaism, to Samaritans, to an Ethiopian eunuch, to a Roman centurion. And so sure was the Church that in this matter it had the mind of Christ that it was at no pains to cancel from its records even that in the Master's own teaching which appeared to contradict it.

A still more pressing problem with which the early Church was confronted has recently begun to press anew upon ourselves. That was the problem created by our Lord's reiterated proclamation of an immediate coming of the Kingdom and arrival of the Son of Man—what we call the problem of Eschatology. It is well to remind ourselves that, however baffling, perplexing, and even disturbing to faith this problem may be to ourselves, it must have been infinitely more so to the Church of

the second generation. According to the letter of her hope salvation was still in the future, though in the immediate future. Never were greater issues made to depend upon a Divine event, which any day might bring, and some early day must bring. The time came when it was no longer possible to believe that the predictions and promises which the Lord had left with His followers could be fulfilled. Those who were 'standing by' one by one tasted of death: the whole generation passed away: and yet the Son of Man had not appeared with 'the clouds of heaven.' The more we are led to do justice to this element in our Lord's teaching so long overlooked or kept in the background, the more must we be impressed by the fact that the Church triumphantly surmounted this shattering of her dearest hope, and the more value must we attach to the interpretation of that teaching by the aid of which she was able to bear the brunt of such a shock. Once more, this interpretation was not in the first place an intellectual one; it was experimental. And the experience on which it rested had been accumulating and crystallizing during a long period before the crisis became acute. The result appears to have been that, when the moment arrived, the Church hardly felt the shock at all. Christians were already provided with the solution of the problem, and allusions to what might well have issued in the perishing of the Church are but rare in the Epistles, because the Church had an interpretation which satisfied her. What then was this interpretation? It rested upon, and proceeded from, certain religious and ethical experiences which translated themselves into the conviction that the Kingdom had come already. It had ceased to be a distant hope or even an impending certainty. Men who 'believed in Christ' were men who already 'tasted of the powers of the world to come.' Through fellowship with Him they experience 'righteousness and peace and joy,' emancipation from bondage to the lower world, the citizenship of free men in a world that was unseen. Even before they had formulated or perhaps could formulate the conclusion, they knew that this was what the Kingdom meant, and that this was what the Master meant by the Kingdom. What had been the eschatological hope had been realized in religious and ethical experience.

When we look through the records to find the cause or source of this new experience and this new conviction, it is not difficult to recognize it in what is described as the Pentecostal gift of the Holy Spirit. By that is to be understood, however, not the event of Pentecost merely, still less the circumstances and marvels by which it was accompanied. We are apt to be misled (as it is possible that St. Luke was misled by the form in which the narrative reached him) into putting the emphasis on what were really the less important elements in that great event. We allow these outward circumstances, the rushing wind, the cloven tongues, and especially the *glossolalia* to impress us almost exclusively. And because such things appear to the modern mind to be secondary or even antithetic to real religious experience, we tend to relegate this factor in the life of the early Church to the region of the mystical or the irrelevant.

We must learn to do justice to the real miracle which not only happened in that hour, but went on happening. The Spirit which then became the master-motive power of personal and of corporate Christianity was not called the Spirit of 'unity and brotherly love' for no reason or out of mere literary instinct. Neither does the description suggest what remained still an ideal. It was coined to describe what had taken place, and what continued to take place when men came into spiritual fellowship with the Risen Christ.

Men discovered these qualities in the Spirit because these were the results that followed on His presence. We see these results in the birth of a new consciousness, that of a sacred unity or fellowship, κοινωνία, in which all believers were reciprocally bound, and a sacred force, ἀγάπη, knitting men together in what Paul afterwards called the Body of Christ. Pentecost had for one of its results the creation of this sense of brotherhood and the inauguration of a mode of life corresponding to the same. The subsequent history of the early Church shows us the working out in detail of this principle, a whole series of new ethical ideas at work, mutual respect, mutual service, mutual self-sacrifice between men whose only bond was their common relation to Christ, the merging of the individual in the corporate whole, in a word, love of the brethren as a governing motive of life. 'Such was the creation of the Holy Ghost. He gave not only words and hearts overflowing with enthusiasm; but He also made hearts kind, gentle, ready to help and to serve.' When Paul said that the fruit of the

Spirit is love, joy, peace, honour, goodness, self-control, he was not stretching after an unrealized ideal; he was describing what he himself had experienced, and what he had seen following on the reception of the Spirit by others.

If now we throw our thoughts back to our Lord's ethical teaching, and still more to His attitude to men and to life, we are amazed to find (we ought to be much more amazed than we are) that all the great outlines as well as the central motives of Christian character as realized after Pentecost are the same as those set forth by Him as ideals for His disciples, for the members of His coming Kingdom. The Church had thus interpreted the eschatological element in His teaching first of all in practice. The Kingdom had come when, through the Spirit of Christ set free through His death and resurrection, men began to live not only according to the precepts of Jesus, but in harmony with His mind, for whom to do the will of God was meat and drink. The eschatological hope had been fulfilled in terms of ethical achievement.

In these two cases—the Universality of the Gospel and the transvaluation of eschatology—we have found that the interpretation which the Church put upon Christ's teaching is not only in continuity with one aspect at least of that teaching, but is the legitimate expression mediated by Christian experience of what lies below the surface of His ministry. It is an interpretation of His thought guided by an impression made by Himself. And in each case it will be commonly admitted that the interpretation was right, that it has been justified both in history and through our closer study of the sources. And this sets up a presumption in favour of the interpretation provided by the Church through various of its leaders in the last and crowning case,—the Person of Christ.

We have that interpretation in various forms, stated in terms of Jewish Messianism, of Jewish Priesthood and sacrifice, of Hellenistic and even Gnostic speculation, and finally, in the Fourth Gospel, in terms of a philosophic theory of the nature of God. What is, primarily at least, of more importance than the form of these interpretations, or of any one of them, is that which lies below and comes before them all, that which they are an effort to express. And that again is something less intellectual than religious. It is, in fact, an attitude to Christ. One after another we feel that these men are seeking round their universe of thought to find some intelligible and communicable answer to the question: Who is this who means so much to me, who has done and does so much for me and for mankind? The mistake which many make who criticize the form into which they threw their thought, is that they confuse the substance with the form. It is futile to dismiss the testimony of the Church to her Lord with an airy reference to 'dogmatic reflexion,' 'dogmatic pre-supposition,' and the like, and forget that there was something anterior to this—an attitude of mind and will, which men took up towards Jesus Risen and Exalted. And in one word it was the same attitude as they took up towards God. It was an attitude of worship, of surrender, of expectation. They spoke of Him in terms which had been consecrated in the literature of their race to the description of Jehovah. Israel of old had been defined as 'they that call upon the name of the Lord.' The followers of Christ adopt the same self-description; but by 'Lord' they mean the Risen Jesus. They pray to Him precisely as they pray to God. Their eyes are fixed on Him as the dispenser of spiritual gifts, as the Judge of human conduct,—and all this not *because* they called Him God, but *before* they called Him God.

'There cannot be the least doubt,' says Johannes Weiss, 'that the name Lord has now a religious significance. In the expression "Our Lord Jesus Christ" the whole primitive religion is contained in germ. Dutiful obeisance, reverence, and sacred fear lest He should be offended, the feeling of complete dependence upon Him, thankfulness and love and trust, in short, everything a man can feel towards God, comes in this name to utterance. That which is expected of God, the Lord (Jesus) can also impart.'

In this third case also the interpretation which the Church put upon Christ was primarily ethical or practical—that is to say, it expressed itself in terms of conduct and character before it expressed itself in intellectual propositions. It was an interpretation of the kind which is due to the influence of one personality upon another rather than to the inculcation of truth or the communication of fact. It was an attempt, or rather a series of attempts, to explain a relation by describing the Person to whom men felt themselves to be related. And here again the relation, the attitude, corresponds

most closely with that which Jesus invited, nay demanded, on the part of His disciples towards Himself. He had not explained on what (dogmatic) grounds that demand was based, any more than they say on what (dogmatic) grounds it is conceded. But He made it clear that a man's attitude towards Himself is the supreme criterion of his standing before God both here and hereafter. In this case also we have the same seizing by the Church of the underflowing current of vital thought in the mind of Jesus, and the like expression of it first of all in life and practice, and that before the interpretation took form and substance in propositions regarding the Person of Christ.

And if the primitive Church and even St. Paul refrained from carrying the categorical interpretation of the Person of Christ to the point of calling Him God, there were good reasons for that. On the one hand, they had the ingrained shrinking of an intense monotheism from any such apparent infringing on the sole majesty of the Most High. On the other, they were innocent of the philosophical training and ignorant of the philosophical terms which enabled the Greek Fathers of a later generation at least to grapple with the problem.

Not a few other cases of similar interpretation could be adduced. But reviewing these three, which are typical and in a sense crucial, they seem to reveal a real homogeneity of process, a real common source in the impression made by the Personality of Jesus acting as an interpretative factor on the deposit of His teaching, and a real common issue in an ethical ideal not wholly unrealized, which alike in principle and in detail is a reproduction of His character. Such are the lines, slender but infrangible, which span the 'unbridgeable chasm.' What we have in our records is not a series of new departures, but a continuous movement. And it is one whose origin is sufficiently accounted for by Jesus of Nazareth, whose legitimate issue is seen in the Christ of the Epistles.

The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF ACTS.

ACTS XXI. 13.

Then Paul answered, What do ye, weeping and breaking my heart? for I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.

GRAPHIC pictures have often been drawn of scenes in which spiritual pastors have taken leave of their flocks, but nothing more pathetic was ever written than the few brief sentences by which St. Luke describes the Apostle's farewell to the elders at Miletus. The final prayer and commendation to God, the sore weeping and lamentation, the overwhelming affection of the last embrace, their painful struggle to tear themselves apart—it all makes up a picture of sadness and sorrow, often, no doubt, equalled but rarely surpassed.

It must have made St. Paul waver for a moment in his long-cherished determination to see Jerusalem once more, and in all the joy and gladness of the Pentecostal Feast; but the temptation was resisted, and again, 'he steadfastly set his face,' like his Master, towards the Holy City, and the vessel on which he embarked soon carried him out of the sight of his friends.

When we consider the text we discover that (1) it reveals the spirit of St. Paul's life; (2) it suggests the motives which inspired it; and (3) it affords an example of the true principle of life in Christ Jesus.

I.

THE SPIRIT OF ST. PAUL'S LIFE.

1. There is a great contrast between Saul the Pharisee and Paul the Apostle. In his youth and early manhood Paul had cherished dreams of selfish ambition which had called forth all his energies. A native of Tarsus, a free-born Roman citizen, and receiving the best education which the time and circumstances afforded, the most brilliant prospects opened before him. Soon he became conscious of possessing extraordinary gifts, of inherent powers fitting him for greatness; and his spirit was fervent, and quivered with intensest life. But now all was changed, and a spirit of self-sacrifice supplanted that of self-interest and self-aggrandizement.