

THE DEEPER LIFE

The Simplicity of Christianity

By Rev. S. G. Bland, D.D.

THE Arabian story told of a tent which could shelter an army, and could be folded up so small as to be carried in the hand. That is a parable of Christianity which has guidance for every action, control for every relation, inspiration and direction for the whole of human life and can yet be gathered up into a simplicity a child can understand and a brevity that can be whispered into the ear of a dying man.

How quickly the essential simplicity of Christianity disclosed itself can be seen in the response of Paul and Silas to the cry of the awe-struck keeper of the jail at Philippi. The earthquake, the failure of the prisoners to take advantage of the open doors, perhaps the singing of the scourged men, and possibly fragments of their strange preaching that may have reached his ears, all combined to awaken in him a profound reverence for these mysterious messengers. Falling at their feet he cried, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Quick and confident came the answer, an answer which nearly nineteen hundred years of new experiences, new testings, new criticisms, have not in the slightest degree invalidated but only confirmed and opened up, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved."

More than thirty years ago in union evangelistic services in an Ontario village I heard a Baptist minister say that the word "trust" expresses for our day the meaning of the Greek words better than the phrase "believe on." He had grasped then what was not so generally seen as now that the words belief and believe are not the best words to convey the real idea. They are too strongly intellectual. They suggest orthodoxy. They seem to call for correct thinking. They seem to imply a creed. Whereas the action that is demanded is simply surrender, obedience, confidence, or in one word, and probably the very best word, trust. One can trust a man even if one knows little about him, even if one has many mistaken ideas about him. It is only necessary to know enough to inspire confidence. A child can trust as truly as a man, though ever so much more limited in knowledge. So let us substitute for the colder and more intellectual term, believe, the warmer and more heartfelt word, trust, and then we have Christianity, so to speak, in a nut-shell, the quintessence of Christianity.

Whatever the ignorance, whatever the intellectual limitations, whatever the faults, the dark sins, salvation comes to every man who knows enough of Jesus, and whose heart is right enough, to trust him. This is enough in any case to start with.

If we may venture to try to discover the secret of the unique power that Christianity has disclosed to seize the universal human heart we find one element of that divine secret just in this, that Christianity gives the supreme place not to an idea but to a person. To it salvation is just discipleship. It does not impose a creed, a world-view, a conception of life or of goodness or of the highest good. To become a Christian does not mean the acceptance of any philosophy of life as such. It means just this, that Jesus seems supremely worthy to be trusted and that one will trust Him. It is not necessary at the outset, nor, indeed, is it possible at that or any later stage to know all that is involved in that surrender. One may carry into the new life of discipleship all sorts of defective and erroneous ideas about the Christian life, all sorts of evil ways and ideas, recognized as such or not recognized as such, but the moment a man trusts Jesus he becomes a Christian as truly as the oldest saint. He becomes a child of God. In the fundamental meaning of the word, he is saved. How divinely

easy and simple it is! This alone would seem to be sufficient proof of the divineness of Jesus, that He has given us a way of salvation so accessible and intelligible. For if a human being has intelligence enough to be considered human he can trust. Little children can trust. Even the dumb brute can trust and sometimes with a wonderful insight. So it is hard to see how our Saviour could have placed salvation on a lower level and made it more universally possible than in making it all turn on such a simple, easy and broadly human thing as trusting Himself.

So the deepest secret of Christian preaching is just to show Jesus, to set Him forth by life and word in such a way that people will find it natural and easy to trust Him, that, indeed, they will find it almost impossible to withhold trust. Christian preaching may accomplish anything else and it accomplishes nothing if it fails to accomplish that. It may accomplish that and apparently nothing else, and it has really accomplished everything.

Professor Tyndall, in his famous address to the British Association at Belfast, in 1874, startled the thinking world by his saying, "I see in matter the promise and potency of all life." True Christianity has always seen in this trust in Jesus "the promise and potency of all goodness." One who trusts Jesus does not instantly become a finished saint. He may have almost everything to learn, and almost every habit to change, but his faith in Jesus is the germ of all righteousness. It is the mustard seed which holds in it the tree. It is the leaven which has the power to leaven all the meal.

Another element in this divine secret of Christianity is not only that Christianity presents not an idea, or a law, or a philosophy but a Person, but that this Person asks so little a thing as trust.

He might have asked love. He was entitled to ask love. But he does not primarily ask love. He desires love, covers it above all things, served and suffered, and died to win love, but He does not ask it. And here again is the Divine wisdom of Christianity. For love is not subject to command. One cannot give it always where one is asked, not even where one wants, sometimes least of all where one feels one ought. One has often heard people urged to give their hearts to Jesus. No one has the right to make such a request. It is not authorized by the Saviour. He is the Saviour because He is so wise and so gracious and knows so well what we can do and what we cannot. What He asks is that we trust Him. We can trust where we do not love, even where we dislike. Loving and disliking are not in our own power. Our hearts defy our control. But our wills are our own, and trusting is an act of will. We can trust a physician we dislike, we can follow a leader whom we do not love. We can trust Christ and put ourselves in His hands even if we feel quite powerless to love Him, quite powerless to please Him, quite powerless to do any other good thing whatever.

That is the blessedness of Christ's way. He puts salvation within the reach of the most morally impotent. All He asks is that we let Him have us. The old hymn expresses it beautifully—

"And in Thy blessed hands I am,
And trust Thee for a perfect cure."
In one of E. P. Roe's novels, I think it is "The Opening of a Chestnut Burr," and in that and others of his stories I found great interest and help years ago, a young woman trying to do some Christian work has great difficulty in making the way of salvation clear to a gnarled and twisted old man. But at last the light comes. Full of joy he explains to her how at last he "just



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