

OUR CONTRIBUTORS.

A PLEA FOR POPULAR INSTRUCTION IN THE EVIDENCES OF CHRISTIANITY.

A PAPER READ BEFORE THE INTER-PROVINCIAL MINISTERS' ASSOCIATION AND THE WELLINGTON COUNTY S. S. ASSOCIATION,
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The period during which our Lord appeared and asserted His claims as a divinely commissioned Teacher was one distinguished by the diffusion of the highest form of ancient culture. The golden age of the literature and philosophy of Greece had passed away; but its best and most enduring productions had become the study of thoughtful men throughout the Roman Empire, including the country where Jesus of Nazareth was born, and to which His personal ministry was confined. We can see the wisdom of God in arranging that Christ should appear, not in an age of intellectual darkness and among a barbarous people, but at a time when the highest form of ancient culture was most fully developed and most widely diffused, and among a people who possessed a sacred literature which presented exalted views of the Divine nature, and perfections such as were nowhere else to be found. It resulted from this, that His claims were subjected to such a searching examination as they could not otherwise have been; and we know, as a matter of history, that those claims were established to the satisfaction of multitudes of all classes in all parts of the Empire.

The validity of the claims of Jesus of Nazareth may be satisfactorily established in more ways than one. In other words, there are various lines of argument fitted to produce a rational conviction that He was a Teacher sent from God. But, I presume, we are all agreed that there is one way which has the great advantage over all others, that it is open to all and is more satisfactory than any other. I refer to the way of which our Lord Himself speaks, when He says, "If any man will do" (or, as you may be aware, more precisely and correctly, according to the original, "if any man is willing to do") "the will of God, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it is of God, or whether I speak of myself," John vii. 17. This, of course, does not imply either a perfect knowledge of the will of God, or a perfect conformity to it in conduct; but simply an honest desire and aim to do the will of God, on the part of a man who may be very ignorant of God's will, and conscious of much imperfection, shortcoming, and sin, in his best endeavours to do it—a desire and aim, his possession of which is proved by his actually, though it may be very imperfectly, doing what he already knows, or has reason to believe, to be the will of God, and actually using means such as are accessible to him to obtain further light in regard to it.

We can all see the wisdom and goodness of God, in the way here indicated of attaining a conviction of the divinity of the teachings of Jesus. For, (1.) It is a way open to all. It does not require qualifications which only a few men can possess; but simply a qualification which all men may and ought to possess—we might even say, far less than they ought to possess. He does not require that men should be philosophers, or scientists, or adepts in history; but simply that they should possess a willingness to do the will of God. There are other ways in which a rational conviction may be produced in the mind, that the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth is divine. It can be proved historically that He appeared in Judea at or near the time usually assigned to His appearance; that He astonished His countrymen by His works and His teaching; that, having been put to death as an impostor and blasphemer, He rose from the dead and thereby fully vindicated His claims. The facts of the Gospel history, including the resurrection of Jesus, can be proved by evidence incomparably stronger than any evidence that can be adduced in proof of any of the other events of ancient history, the evidence being not only greater in amount, but of a kind altogether peculiar—for such is the suffering testimony of the early Christian witnesses. But comparatively few can make a thorough study of this evidence. An unlearned Christian must accept the facts of Gospel history (i.e., in their historical character) just as he accepts other and well-known facts of history. And, in the one case as well as in the other, it is an outrage on common sense to say that he has good reason to accept them. He is, on the contrary, fully justified in the persuasion, that neither the facts of the Gospel

history nor the facts of ancient common history could have commanded the general acceptance that they have done, except for their truth. It is very easy, of course, for one who is so disposed to start difficulties which an unlearned Christian is unable to solve, just as Dr. Whately has proposed difficulties in relation to the first Napoleon which only one well acquainted with the history of his time could satisfactorily answer. But while the unlearned Christian has good reason to accept the facts of the Gospel history, just as unlearned men have good reason to accept the facts of common history, he is not competent to reason out the matter in detail, in the face of the man who chooses to question them. If, therefore, Jesus had made the full assurance of the divinity of His teaching to depend on the historical evidence of the facts of the Gospel history, the attainment of such assurance would be quite beyond most men; because very few men have, or can have, the mental training and the historical knowledge that are necessary in discussing the questions that may be raised. The Gospel, in that case, would have been a Gospel for the few, and not for the many, or for all. Only think of Jesus Christ telling men that in order to come to a satisfactory assurance of the divinity of His teaching, they must become philosophers, or scientists, or adepts in historical studies! The wisdom and goodness of God have determined otherwise. Jesus Christ came into the world, not with good news for learned men and philosophers, or for other men through them, but with good news directly for all men, including the poor and the unlearned, whom the pride of social distinction and of intellectual culture despises. In accordance with the design of God's loving regard for all classes of men, not only is the peculiar Gospel itself level to the apprehension of the meanest rational capacity, but the full and firm persuasion that it is from God depends not on qualifications which few can possess—not on high intellectual development, or on large acquisitions of knowledge—but on a qualification that all men may possess, and ought to possess—a moral qualification, consisting in a simple willingness to do the will of God.

(2.) The demand for this qualification cannot be regarded as a hard requirement. This could not be said of a demand that a man should become learned in history in order to his being capable of a full assurance of the divinity of Christ's teaching. Compliance with such a demand were an impossibility in perhaps ninety-nine cases out of a hundred. But Jesus makes no such demand. He accords no advantage either to the adepts in philosophy, science, or history, who are necessarily few, or to the smatterers, whose name is legion. He requires nothing beyond a willingness to do the will of God—a requirement such that no other can be thought of so simple, reasonable and practicable. Who can possibly find fault with the requirement that a man shall be what every man ought to be? And far less than this is the requirement, seeing it is neither a *perfect knowledge* of the will of God, nor a *perfect conformity* with it in practice that is demanded, but only the sincere and honest desire and aim to do the will of God, associated, it may be, with much ignorance and imperfection.

The sequel of this paper will show that I have no wish to depreciate the historical evidence of Christianity. But I believe it is of no little importance that prominence should be given to the great truth, that the highest and most satisfactory evidence of the divinity of Christian teaching is *equally accessible to all*, as depending not upon intellectual qualifications such as can be possessed only by a few, but upon a moral qualification that all ought to possess, and the want of which is highly blameworthy. And at the same time, it would be well, in dealing with this subject, to endeavour to make it plain to the intelligence of our people that this evidence is, in its very nature, at once the highest obtainable and satisfying beyond any other. For, I believe, we can give a most sufficient answer to the question which it is natural to ask: "How can a man who is destitute of learning, who has little or no historical knowledge—it may be even a child—not only understand the Gospel, but have a well-grounded persuasion that it is from God?" Of course such a persuasion is attained otherwise than by a competent acquaintance with the external evidence, the ground of it must lie in the Gospel itself. Nor is it anything but what is in accordance with reason that the doctrine of a teacher sent from God should be such as to approve itself divine, and that it should do so not to all men indiscriminately, but only

to such and surely to such as are willing to do the will of God. Let us illustrate this.

There are two ways in which we may have a satisfactory persuasion regarding a man, that he is possessed of, of great integrity and benevolence. Trustworthy persons may testify to his possession of these qualities. But we may have an equally reasonable, and even far stronger persuasion, without any testimony. We may know the man by intimate acquaintance with him, so that we can ourselves certify to others his possession of these qualities, instead of needing to have it certified to us. Again, there are two ways in which we may have a full persuasion that a certain piece of writing is the production of some particular man. We may have trustworthy information that he is the author of it. Or we may be so well acquainted with his style of thinking and writing, that we have sooner begun to read than we know with the full conviction that he, and no other man, is the author. And so it is with the teaching of Christ. A man may have a reasonable and strong conviction that it is from God, by his study of the evidence of the facts of the Gospel history. But he may have an equally reasonable and far stronger conviction, derived from the teaching itself. He may, as our Lord very distinctly and decidedly intimates, have such a knowledge of God as to be able to recognize God's voice when He speaks. Is it not in the highest degree reasonable to suppose that, if there is a God who is the perfect of all that is great and good, a creature that He has made capable of knowing Him, should so know Him as to be able to recognize His voice, or, in other words, able to determine, from the character of a professed message from Him, whether that message is really from Him; while another creature, though also capable of knowing Him, may be so ignorant of Him as not to be able to recognize His voice? Is there such difference between one man's knowledge of a human author and another man's knowledge of him, that one knows at a glance that a certain piece of writing is his production, while the other is utterly incompetent to form any judgment in the matter; and yet there not be such a difference between one man's knowledge of God and another man's knowledge of Him, that the one can recognize the voice of God when He speaks, while the other cannot? It is so, according to the teaching of Christ. And, in accordance with this teaching, it is a matter of fact in human experience, that there are men who can recognize God's voice and men who cannot. These two classes of men are respectively those who are willing to do the will of God and those who are not. The man who is willing to do the will of God comes to know that the teaching of Jesus is from God, by attaining such knowledge of Him as to be able to recognize His voice in a way which the man who is not willing to do the will of God cannot acquire.

There can be no objection to the views now presented, arising from the fact of man's native depravity and ignorance of divine things, neither of which frees him from the obligation resting on him as God's rational creature. As we have already said, a man who is ignorant of the will of God, and conscious of much imperfection and sin may, notwithstanding, be truly willing to do the will of God; and he certainly is so, if he actually, though very imperfectly, endeavours to do the will of God in so far as he knows it, and uses all available means to know it further. Did our limits permit, or were it needful in the present paper, it might be shown in detail that the man who is willing to do the will of God is no other than the sinful man who under conviction of sin, is led to inquire what he must do to be saved. His motive may at first seem selfish, and some may affect to despise it; but He who knows our guilt and depravity, and appeals to our own self-interest, will not despise the cry of the sinner who feeling that he is ready to perish, would know what God would have him to do. However low his motive may be, it is enough meantime that it is effectual to start him on the way of doing the will of God. He will be actuated by higher motives as he progresses. Meantime, feeling that he is a lost sinner, having no hope or light save what comes from God, he is, by keeping the way on which his conviction of sin has started him, have, in due time, a full persuasion arising out of his own personal experience, that the teaching of Christ's Gospel is divine. We are not, in connection with this aspect of our subject, to overlook the necessity of the agency of the Spirit in the production of this full persuasion, but rather to give prominence to it. In other words, we are to give no un-