

Christ expresses a revolt against Rabbinism, fundamentally it is nothing short of a charter for His new kingdom. And it gains this constitutional importance simply from the fact that it elevates into prominence, and safeguards as of primary value, the spiritual rights of the individual.

To see the significance of this change, let it be remembered on what a different conception men had been accustomed to organize themselves into religious communities. In all antiquity, the State was the religious unit. To it attached the sacredness which we now attach to the Church. The gods were gods of the land. Their cult was a service paid by public officials at the expense of government. The chief of the State was the *pontifex maximus*. In face of a system so firmly organized, the religious rights of the private individual were nowhere. Liberty of conscience was undreamt-of. Private was merged in public worship. Access to God was possible only through a State priesthood. Each man's faith was fixed for him by functionaries empowered to interpret the will of heaven. Dissent was disloyalty. In short, the individual was simply swallowed up, with all his personal responsibilities and rights, in the vast social whole of which he formed a part.

The system is one of which we have to day no complete survivals in any great community. But before Christ there was no religious community in existence of which social authority was not the formative principle rather than individual conviction. Even the religion of Israel was not, and could not be, any real exception. For although, under Old Testament teaching, religion became more and more an inward, spiritual, and therefore personal relationship betwixt the soul and God, yet it never disentangled itself altogether from the mould of a State Theocracy. So long as the kingdom stood, everything in the domain of faith and morals, no less than in that of government, was prescribed by public authority—an authority which was at once national, and at the same time divine. Through one authoritative order of public functionaries—the priests—men approached God's mercy-seat to worship; through another order of the prophets—the oracles of heaven were authoritatively declared. At Jerusalem, almost as little as at Memphis or Babylon, was there room left for the free play of private judgment, or the claims of the conscience to determine individual duty.

The form in which our Lord encountered this corporate authority dominating the religious life of a people was Rabbinism. While the Jewish priesthood survived as the official mediator in every act of worship, the old function of authoritative teaching had degenerated into interpretation only of the divine will; and this in the hands of the Rabbis was stiffening into a rigid system of traditional unwritten law. The hand which thus continued to interpose itself between Almighty God and the soul and conscience of His child had not become less authoritative in becoming cold and dead. Rabbinism was the degradation of elements which had always existed in Judaism, but as a monopoly of religion in the interests of a class, it proved itself singularly fatal to religious life. For the dominant order claimed to absorb into itself the threefold authority against which our Lord protests in my text—authority to teach God's truth, authority to bless with the heavenly Father's favour, authority to bind the conscience with the commands of the Most High. Alike in faith, in worship, and in morals, "Scribes and Pharisees" ruled supreme—the teachers, fathers, masters of the people.

Now, in express contrast to all this, Jesus avows that He is about to erect His spiritual commonwealth on the principle of individual freedom. Let the novelty and the boldness of this "departure" be noted. They obtained a presumption that religious communities could be founded only upon authority, corporate or personal. That presumption was mighty, because it was unbroken. To venture the experiment of basing a world-wide religious community upon sheer individualism upon the unfettered conviction, choice, and responsibility of single souls was a proceeding as hazardous as it was untold. Nevertheless, this is what He is doing in the text. He sweeps the board clear that He may build on fresh lines. He begins by abolishing any human or visible authority in religion, and so having each man alone before God as a solitary, responsible, spiritual unit, independent, as to the deepest and most sacred element of his being, of all his fellows. It seems at first sight a strange way to found a community or kingdom, to commence

by isolating each human being in lonely freedom that he may grow aware of those unseen ties which bind him—him for himself—to God alone. Yet it is certainly a society, a commonwealth, which Christ aims at. Only His kingdom is to be a kingdom of God in this thorough-going sense, that of all its parts alike God is to be the sole central bond, holding its members in a unity by holding each of them in separate attachment—that is, not in corporate, but in individual, attachment to Himself. The kingdom which he proclaims, therefore, is not first a corporation, bound by internal human or earthly bonds, between which and God some sort of link is then forged—as the link of a law, or of a priesthood, or of a theocratic king. No, but it grows up by selection and accretion of individuals, between each of whom and God the inner link of religious faith and life has first been formed. In short, it is a fraternity of the equal and the free. Each man of it alike owes his place there to his private and personal relationship with God, whose kingdom it is. Each man of it alike is entitled to learn saving truth for himself at first hand from God, to come to God for himself at first hand for fatherly grace and blessing; to take his orders at first hand for himself as one who is responsible to no other. Whatever union may ultimately bind the subjects of this kingdom to one another must evidently grow out of these prior relationships of each to God, and be moulded by them. For the primary thing is that the spiritual rights of the soul get their due, and the immediacy of a man's personal dependence upon God. I said the words before us contain the charter of Christian liberty. Are they not the charter which recognizes for the first time, and in recognizing guarantees, the inalienable rights of the human spirit?

I venture to think that our Lord could not have undertaken to reorganize mankind into a religious society on these lines, by first flinging each member of it nakedly upon God as Unseen Teacher, Father, and Lord, unless His religion had been one which secured a valid reconciliation or reunion betwixt God and man. Manifestly it was a tremendous risk to begin by disintegrating mankind into spiritual atoms after this fashion, to dispense at the outset with what all ancient wisdom trusted to as the only bond for society; the sanctions, to wit, of a common religion, enforced by the authority of a social system, and by the overwhelming force of corporate sentiment. Such a proposal required a moral courage which, in any mere human reformer, would deserve to be styled audacity. But it is plain that our Lord reckoned upon bringing each human being, thus set free in the awful loneliness and grandeur of his spiritual personality, into direct and commanding relations with the Eternal Author of his being. Men can safely stand clear of eternal authority speaking in God's name then, but only then, when they are set in immediate contact with the invisible supreme authority—with God Himself. All interposed authority—of prophets true or false, of priests and rabbis, of interpreters and fathers in God—all interposed authority (I say) is only useful so long as it is necessary; that is, so long as the way is not yet laid open for the human spirit to draw near for itself, and hear the voice, and learn the will, and share the life, of the Eternal Father and Lord of all. But let this boldest of Teachers and of Founders be Himself the divine Reconciler and Mediator, through whom the meanest soul of man may find the very God, may receive straight from its source the divine light that illumines, the divine law that regenerates, and the divine law that guides—then is it safe, then only wise, to proclaim the abolition of human authority in religion, and enfranchisement of souls.

This immediateness of attachment to God breaks up (if we follow the lines of our text) into three particulars, in which I cannot think it fanciful to see some allusion, not obtrusive, yet inevitable, from the nature of the case, to the economic Trinity of Redemption. Notice the threefold link which binds to God the soul emancipated from spiritual authorities on earth.

To begin with, "One is your Teacher." Each soul that needs and craves the light has in Christ a separate and an equal claim on that divine person, whose office it is to lead us into truth. Given those moral requisites, which are a monopoly of none—candour and a pure heart, humility and willingness to do God's will—then the inner eye will be enlightened to know the Father and the Son through the

indwelling of Him who is "the Spirit of Truth." For the old promise of a time when all God's children should be taught of Him, has found its fulfilment in that spiritual society on which the anointing abides, and of which St. John writes: "Ye know all things—ye need not that anyone teach you."

Next, "One is your Father." Through Christ the way lies open for every man's return to the common Father's love, and that restored favour of His which is life. No man owes to his fellow mortal this right to return; nor may any sacerdotal class bar access any longer, or dispense at pleasure the devoted goodwill of our Heavenly Parent. But every regenerate child of God, accepted through faith in the Beloved, holds now a place of equal nearness and of equal boldness. This is that freedom from a ceremonial yoke, and from all external and arbitrary methods of winning the Father's favour, from which St. Paul has taught that Christ makes His people free.

Lastly, "One is your Master"—that is, your guide in conduct *kath'hyponotaton*—"even the Christ." Freedom of conscience is only then secured when one has learned to lay one's will in the hand of Christ, who is the Lord of duty, because He is the perfect utterance of earth in word and example of the Father's perfect will. And this absolute responsibility to the Lord, by whom alone we must all be judged, is the equal prerogative of every disciple. "Who art thou that judgest the servant of another? To his own Lord he standeth or falleth." The pledge and safeguard for liberty of conscience is personal responsibility to Christ.

Thus, along these three lines—distinct, yet closely related—does Jesus strike the death-notes of all spiritual tyranny—of all human authority in religion. He does it by enabling each of us alike, and each of us for himself, to know the truth, and find the love, and follow the guidance, of God, the Supreme, thrice holy and thrice blessed.

Yes, the death-note was struck when Jesus spoke. But the principle of spiritual authority as the bond of any possible kingdom of God among men is one that dies hard.

I have no time to unfold the stages of the story that will be sufficient to remind my fathers and brethren how unprepared the world of the first centuries proved itself to be to realize in its purity the Lord's ideal. He desired His people to constitute a spiritual brotherhood, built up through the regeneration of souls held together only by fraternal sympathy, but admitting of the free exercise of those spiritual rights which He Himself had purchased for every man in brotherhood where each man should be taught free above, enjoy free access into the family of God and yield to Christ alone an unqualified obedience. But you know what happened. You know how soon the rights of the individual Christian came to be surrendered to a mistaken theory of Church union and catholicity; how the original deposit of Christian truth was vested first in the consenting tradition of Apostolic Churches, then in the great patriarchates, then in general councils, last in the see of Rome; how the access of the soul to divine grace was restricted, partly to sacramental channels in the hands of a priesthood, partly to the services of the orthodox and Catholic Church; how, ultimately, the clergy assumed absolute control, even over morals, by the binding decisions of canon law, and by the direction of consciences through the confessional. In short, you know how, little by little, a visible external authority grew up in Christendom, like another Theocracy upon earth, to supplant the free fraternity of equal sons of God as Christ had founded it by no other system of spiritual rule, not less minute and vexatious than Rabbinism, and a great deal more subtle and far-reaching. Underneath that huge corporate system of the Medieval Church—arranged to pronounce in the name of God, and wielding authority over the soul altogether irresponsible—individual religion was once more submerged.

All this is well known. Now, against this reposed despotism, the Reformation was a revolt. As out of that revolt, with its counter assertion of the rights of the individual, sprang those Christian communities which are here present by their representatives assembled in council. We cannot help looking back to-day to the birthday of the evangelical churches of modern Christendom. Not only is it the date to which we may all of us trace back, whether directly or remotely, our own origin as Presbyterian communions; but I think we have some right to