

Messenger and Visitor

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S. MCC. BLACK

Editor.

85 Germain Street, St. John, N. B.

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The One Foundation

The warfare of controversy which for long centuries has been waged between the opponents and defenders of Christianity, has not yet come to an end. The style of armor and the modes of attack and defence change more or less as the centuries pass and as human knowledge is extended into new fields of research, but the inevitable conflict continues indefinitely. In the present age, as in the past, the assault upon Christianity frequently takes the form of a critical attack upon its sacred writings. It should not need to be said that all critics are not of the same complexion and that all criticism is not the same criticism. There is a criticism which is undevout, arrogant and hostile, and there is a criticism which is reverent, modest and subject to the authority of Christ. It must be confessed, however, that it is not easy always to draw the line in this matter between that which is friendly and helpful and that which is inimical and destructive to the Christian faith. Even the critics themselves do not seem always to know what the spirit within them signifies and to what results their work is tending. Men who have been recognized as among the ablest and most eminent of Christian scholars, and who would still seem to regard themselves as holding the essentials of the faith, have nevertheless come to take positions in regard to the interpretation of the Scriptures, which seem to other Christian scholars, of equal eminence and ability, to involve a surrender of the very citadel of Christianity. This remark has its application in part in connection with certain articles which have found place in the two volumes so far published of the *Encyclopedia Biblica*, a work which embodies many of the extreme views and tendencies of the newer criticism, and also such a work as *The Historical New Testament*, by Rev. James Moffatt, published during the past year. It was doubtless the appearance of these writings, and the very remarkable character of the views they embody, considered as coming from Christian scholars and ministers of Christian churches, which moved Dr. W. Robertson Nicoll to write a series of articles in *The British Weekly*, which articles, with some additions, have now been published in book form under the title—*The Church's One Foundation**. It is comparatively a small book and the author has expressed his thoughts in terms which will enable him to be understood by intelligent persons generally as well as by those learned in biblical criticism. Concerning Old Testament criticism the book has little to say. It is to the destructive criticism of the New Testament, as more immediately and seriously threatening the Christian position, that the author gives attention.

Dr. Nicoll simplifies the discussion by indicating at once the *sine qua non* of Christianity and placing the cardinal emphasis in respect to all criticism of the Christian Scriptures, where it doubtless belongs, on the facts concerning Jesus. "What do they indicate—Whose son is he? If it can be shown that he is a son of man merely, in the ordinary sense, and that he is not Son of God in an unique and divine sense, then the battle must be counted lost and the citadel of the faith must be surrendered. But if the things which the apostles taught concerning the unique and divine personality of their Lord are still to be believed, then the foundation of the church still stands secure and the strongholds of the

faith are as impregnable as of old. As Westcott has said, "Christ the Word, the Son of God is Himself the Gospel." The Incarnation of God in Christ and His the Resurrection, are essential contents of the Christian faith, and that criticism or doctrine which rejects these thereby surrenders the right to be called Christian. Dr. Nicoll has no quarrel with criticism as such. To ignore the work of criticism would be "disloyalty and cowardice" on the part of the church. Criticism has achieved valuable results which are to be gratefully recognized. But "the church is entitled to ask the critic:—Do you believe in the Incarnation and Resurrection of Christ?" If his reply is in the affirmative, his processes and results are to be examined earnestly and calmly. If he replies in the negative he has missed the way and has put himself outside the church of Christ. If he refuses to answer his silence has to be interpreted."

It is but reasonable, too, Dr. Nicoll insists, that we should know the presuppositions of those who, under whatever name, assaults the citadel of Christianity. What *e. g.*, is their preconception as to the miraculous? "If we assume at the threshold of Gospel study that everything in the nature of miracle is impossible, then the specific questions are decided before the criticism begins to operate in earnest. The naturalistic critics approach the Christian records with an *a priori* theory, and impose it upon them, twisting the record into agreement with it, and cutting out what cannot be twisted." It was such presupposition in regard to the miraculous that vitiated the work of such critics as Paulus, Eichorn, Strauss and Renan. The miraculous must be explained away or gotten rid of at any price. The result, as seen in the case of Strauss and Renan, was the utter rejection of Christianity, or at least such an emasculation of it as to rob it of any special value as a revelation and of all power as a redemption. According to Dr. Nicoll's view, some men of the present day, men who hold positions as ministers in the Christian church, men who have recently written books in the line of biblical criticism and articles in the *Encyclopedia Biblica*, are occupying essentially the same ground as was held by Strauss and Renan, and are therefore to be counted among the hostile, rather than the friendly and helpful, critics of the Christian Scriptures. Of some of these in this connection he speaks with evident regret and pain—such men as Canon Cheyne and the late Dr. A. B. Bruce—for his personal relations with them have been most friendly, and their previous contributions to biblical scholarship he regards as highly valuable. The result, however, of such recent criticism as has been referred to is so to discredit the historical character of the gospel narratives that a haze of uncertainty envelopes everything, and so very little indeed is recognized as distinctly historical that it is impossible in such a dim light as these critics would leave us, to form any very definite idea as to the character, the life and the teachings of Jesus, and so the church's faith and hope is made to rest upon uncertainties.

Dr. Nicoll's argument is directed, therefore, not against Biblical criticism as such, but against a criticism which indicates by its destructive results that, whether consciously so or not to its authors, it is really destructive of the essentials of Christianity. Of this criticism he conceives the ablest exponents to be, not the newer critics who perhaps only dimly perceive, if at all, the logical issue of the positions they have assumed, but rather such men as Renan, and especially Strauss, who, with remorseless logic, accepted the results of the destructive criticism. The argument therefore is not along new lines but along the old and well worn lines of Christian apologetics. The author's tone is one of firm confidence in the impregnable ability of the church's defence from all assaults along this line of attack. The arguments presented are, mainly, the argument from the manifest credibility of the gospel narratives in their essential features, the picture which they present of Jesus in his unique majesty and sinlessness (a picture which it were absurd to regard as the creation of the men who wrote the gospels); the argument from the sinlessness of Jesus, with the tremendous alternative of ascribing to him vanity, arrogance and self-delusion if he was not sinless; the argument for the resurrection as supported by credible testimony and imperatively demanded by the results that follow; the arguments from Christian experience and from the transcendent type of human

character which Christianity has produced in its most saintly representatives;—these are the arguments which we find restated here with freshness and with power. Dr. Nicoll's book will not remove all the perplexities which a friendly or hostile criticism raises, but to many a brave but fainting soldier of the King, it will doubtless be as a brook by the way, from which, having drunk, he shall find fresh courage to renew the conflict. Especially valuable perhaps is the insistence upon the possibility and the supreme value to the Christian of spiritual communion with the source of love and life as a defence against all the assaults upon his faith. Those who have "an auction from the Holy One" are those who "know." "We enter into direct communion with God when we continue instant in prayer. No really great theologian, no really great believer has ever lived to whom prayer was not infinitely more important than any mere exercise of the intellect."

Editorial Notes.

—The tenth International Sunday School Convention, representing the United States, with their Territories and foreign possessions, also Canada and Mexico, is appointed to meet in the city of Denver, Colorado, June 26-30, 1902. The scope of some of the subjects to be discussed is very wide, and doubtless much theoretical and practical wisdom will be brought to bear upon many important questions with which Sunday School workers have to deal. Among the duties with which the Convention is charged, is the election of the American Section of a new Committee to serve, if present plans are continued, for six years, and whose duty it will be to select the lessons of the International Series from 1906 to 1911.

—Dr. Wilbur F. Crafts of Washington, called forth applause at the Prohibitionist Convention held in Toronto last week, by the announcement that negotiations are in progress between the United States and the British Governments, looking toward the extending of an invitation to all commercial nations to unite to prohibit the sale of opium and liquor—beers and wines as well as spirits—to all savage and aboriginal races. Mr. Crafts urged that representations be made in support of this proposition to Hon. Joseph Chamberlain who represents the negotiations on the British side. It may be noted in this connection that the United States Congress has recently passed a bill prohibiting Americans from selling intoxicating liquors or opium in such Pacific Islands as are not under the rule of any civilized power.

—*The Watchman* alludes to the middle-aged people whose earnest, worn faces tell the story of weariness and a too prodigal expenditure of nerve force, and whose faces are going to get more earnest and worn until the silver cord breaks. "What they need," the *Watchman* says, "is not doctors or stimulants, but play. The doctor who would tell his patients how to play would be entitled to the largest fee they could pay." Quite true, for it is not easy for the "Jack" of whom constant work has made "a dull boy" to get himself into a playful mood. And then, if the good doctor would tell us some means of keeping the mill a going while the old horse is turned out to kick up his heels for a while—if he can—in the pasture, he ought to have a double fee.

—Those flaccid encounters which have lately occurred in the United States Senate and in the British Columbia Legislature are certainly not pretty things to record or to read of, and deserve to be condemned as entirely uncivilized expressions of a temper that is far from parliamentary. And yet one may well question whether such incidents are indeed the most disgraceful and condemnable features of parliamentary life, and whether in the horrified remarks with which things of this kind are greeted there is not a good deal of unconscious pharisaism of the kind that strains out the gnat and swallows the camel. To our way of thinking the things that really disgrace Senates and Parliaments and which really endanger democratic government are of another complexion, and are managed for the most part without any violation of what are considered the parliamentary proprieties.

—The report, noted last week, of the release of Miss Ellen M. Stone, missionary of the American Board in Turkey, after having been held for some five months in captivity by brigands, has been confirmed. It seems to be generally accepted that Miss Stone's captors were the agents of a political organization working for the liberation of Macedonia from the Turkish yoke and that the ransom was sought in order to promote this object. According to such meagre reports as have so far been received from Miss Stone, neither she nor her companion in captivity, Madame Tsilka, appear to have suffered any violence at the hands of their captors. But at times they felt keenly the need of occupation, and sometimes suffered from the cold which in the mountains was quite severe, considering the small protection from it that was available. Madame Tsilka's child was born under circum-

* THE CHURCH'S ONE FOUNDATION: Christ and Recent Criticism. By Rev. W. Robertson Nicoll, M. A., LL. D. Editor of "The Expositor" etc. etc. Toronto: Fleming H. Revell Company. Price \$1.25.