

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

The Centre of Indifference.

BY THE REV. F. W. ORDE WARD, B.A.

THE age of faith with Newman and the Oxford Church Movement was followed by the age of unfaith and Science and Herbert Spencer. First the Everlasting Yea, and then the Everlasting Nay. And now, after the great action and the great reaction, we seem hardly to know exactly where and how we stand, and, what is worst of all, we do not seem to care. Meanwhile, half unconsciously, perhaps, in quiet workshops of thought and theology, and even in some laboratories of science itself, the old swords are being sharpened and new weapons are being forged, aimlessly and not quite in earnest, till a fuller formula or a burning epigram, flashed from the lips of some irresponsible poet or prophet, once more inspires a new idea or new ideal, and sets the whole world on fire. This generally means the sudden discovery of the required connecting-link, or fresh relation, which in a moment sheds on the encroaching shadows the very light of eternity. We are all waiting for some big affirmation that will swallow up in the sweetness of its revelation the obsessing doubts and chilly negations, even if it only affirms by way of contradiction. Perhaps some ancient manuscript, still not disinterred, holds the keys which will unlock the secret desired, and lead us into the Promised Land of a broader and brighter faith. Perhaps some quiet, unknown student, playing with dusty old problems, as a child amuses itself with a toy, already trembles on the verge of a new continent of thought. The cross-purposes, the crude theories, the fine-spun speculations of Oxford, and the encyclopædic advance of Germany buried beneath its unwieldy weight of learning—all point to a sunrise gathering and kindling below the horizon.

Reason in the eighteenth century, history in the nineteenth, with their accumulations of converging arguments and evidences, seem for a while, at any rate, to have exhausted their effect, if not their resources, in the presentment of religious truth and its

interpretation. The appeal now appears to be increasingly the experimental. "If any man will do [willeth to do] His Will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of Myself." Faculty implies function. We possess faith, we proceed to apply this, in the natural direction with the appropriate outlet. Will it work? Does it really reveal God to us, and us to ourselves? Has it any true practical value as a principle of guidance, explaining doctrines and making them, not merely intelligible, but living? "By their fruits ye shall know them"—the first and last and most convincing criterion. Christianity translated into terms of action justifies itself by producing finer characters and fairer conduct, in raising the standard of morality, and so it needs no other vindication. Falsehood may exist for years, not as a falsehood, but because it happens to have incorporated in itself a saving element of truth; and it is this sovereign admixture that redeems it from being an unmitigated evil, and enables it even to accomplish a certain amount of good. The cleverest and most beautiful lie, when all lie, if treated as a pattern to follow and a mainspring for behaviour, could only beget more lies. It could not exalt the tone of society or advance the interests of ethics; it would not tend to spiritualize a nation or render people more religious. *Fortes creantur fortibus et bonis.* And, in like manner, no kind or degree of falsehood can generate truth. Falsehood cannot long survive the test of experimental proof, and must be productive of ulterior falsehood, and propagates itself in kind. But beyond this mere repetition—what only deludes at the best—and this mischievous self-multiplication of error we meet the crucial fact that a lie does not act, does not help, does not profit, does not really live. It begets no fruit but the fruit of death and corruption. "Neither doth a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit." It may be urged, on the contrary, that history affords quite a different view or verdict of such results. Peoples with false religions and worshipping false gods have nevertheless attained to a colossal majesty and magnificent civilization, and made earth tremble with the tramp of their invincible legions.

Nor can it be denied for a moment that the "glory which was Greece and the grandeur which was Rome," to say nothing of older and almost mightier empires, have risen to tremendous proportions in wealth and culture and shaken the world. But this has been attained, as we said before or suggested, in spite of, and not because of, their false religions and false gods. Besides, we know that God never left Himself quite without a witness; and the Christianity before Christ, admitted now by all competent judges, has ever operated as a saving clause in the most extravagant cults and cosmogonies with vital, if with little apparent, effect. And the great question now imperatively asked by all thoughtful students and perplexed believers, out of the sleeping Centre of Indifference, is this: Have we a practical principle in Christianity? What is its value as a spiritual dynamo or producing power? Does it really and truly answer as a working, everyday, religious system? Will it enter into our business and pleasure, to colour and guide and control them, to transform and elevate and inspire all our conduct? Is it an authentic illuminating force, an inspiring passion, building and rebuilding old faculties and materials into finer character and fuller, richer life? The most careless and unreflective persons at the present day, though unaware of the fact, are lazily and sceptically putting this problem before themselves. In noting the three great distinctive periods of the Everlasting Yea and the Everlasting Nay, and the Centre of Indifference, we do not mean to imply that any one of the three great factors or forces ever actually terminates or dies. We only intend to show that, at particular times, one of them predominates as the differential tone or temper of the age, while the others are more or less quiescent. They seem to be constitutive parts in the ultimate contents of the human consciousness; they are built into the very structure or machinery of our psychological identity. Man, resolved into his final elements as a rational and therefore religious creature, is a being who eternally affirms and eternally denies, and eternally hesitates or suspends his judgment. Now he believes everything, and hopes everything, and expects

everything ; then he repudiates everything, and burns the gods whom he adored but yesterday, and presents his life as "one great mouth-filling damn" ; and yet again he accepts nothing, and refuses nothing, and commits himself to nothing. And at the present crisis, before a fresh departure in thought and consequently in action, before he formulates some far more splendid and more spacious affirmation, he is indolently and incuriously and unknowingly preparing by an otiose and purblind cynicism for another aggressive leap into the great Peradventure. *Je vais chercher un grand peut-être.*

Common sense, public opinion, hidden behind which we shall often detect, if we look deep enough, some radiant dream or gracious illusion, first overstimulated by a too rapturous confidence, and then underfed by a Science which pretended to be Omniscience, and was often little better than a learned and educated Nescience, have at last cried to the fanatics in both camps, "Halt!" Have we been marching too fast or too slow? Is our so-called progress forward or backward? Are we really moving in the right direction, or even moving at all? Is religion anything or everything? and shall we keep the sacred and the secular in separate water-tight compartments or let them be interfused, because perhaps at bottom they prove to be identical? Must we make life material or spiritual, or can we conceivably escape from God, "in whom we live and move and have our being," and from the far-resonant and everlasting action of Christ and His Blessed Cross? Some have, for the sake of a heedless Hedonism, shelved for good, or rather for evil, the whole question, and launched out on the shining shallows (mistaken for the Divine deeps) of a voluptuous lotus-eating existence that is not life. Others, who profess to be nothing if not severely practical, seem content to coin their souls into dollars, as if Christianity were not the most intensely and infinitely practical thing in the whole world. "For what is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" Not a few imagine they believe that all inquiry has been, and

therefore still must be, hopeless, and endeavour to be satisfied by schemes of reform and philanthropy and for the amelioration of society, and delegate the Divine government to the London County Council or to Lady Warwick and the Labour party. Nevertheless, in spite of adverse appearances, the Centre of Indifference performs a useful and indispensable part, and fills a fruitful office. The great heart of humanity sleeps between its *systole* and *diastole*, only to beat again with a fuller and more free world-throb. The expiration must be followed by inspiration. The human mind, the human spirit, has been giving out and going out in all directions, and now, though in ignorance, it is taking in during the interval of idle rest and aimless discussion without a plan or purpose. But, where lies abound or superstition abounds, it may be that no bigger-lie was ever uttered than this—the assertion that Christ has no message for the toiling masses. If the One who was a Working Man Himself, and enlisted in His service for His mission and ministry none but working men—for even St. Paul the scholar was a tent-maker—can say nothing now helpful to the cause of Labour and Want, then no poet or prophet or preacher (ancient and modern alike) ever did or ever will. For only at the Cross does drudgery, as George Herbert says, become Divine, and receive at once its supreme defence and superb interpretation. Even the very Secularists and extreme Socialists—a noisy and narrow and unrepresentative minority—who crucify Christ again, and put Him to an open shame with one hand, yet with the other hand uphold that Gospel, which, while they profess to condemn, they actually endeavour to practise. “Master, where dwellest Thou? He saith unto them, Come and see.” Yes, and even His crucifiers themselves, though they know it not, keep returning again and yet again to the House Beautiful which Christ inhabits to renew their strength and revise those truths which under other names alone give them all their courage and their confidence. “Jesus answered and said unto them, Go and show John again those things which ye do hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear,

the dead are raised up and the poor have the Gospel preached to them. And blessed is he whosoever shall not be offended in Me." In these words there lies the secret at once of Christianity's grand failure and Christianity's grand success—namely, the Offence of the Cross. Each generation in its peculiar way reopens the perpetual problem. The time spirit, the world spirit, proceeds to set itself in opposition, to accuse and judge and condemn. With the old charge of failure it pronounces sentence and dismisses the case from court, in entire ignorance of the sublime truth that the very failure of Christianity was to constitute its exceeding success. "He saved others, Himself He cannot save." But there are some defeats, and here was the typical and supereminent one, better than any and all victory. Had not Christ failed from the earthly point of view and estimated by temporal standards, He could never have been the spiritual success He was and is, and will be for ever and ever. But who will dare to allege that the course of history, and the moral condition of the race, and the upward religious trend, have not been vastly and vitally affected for the better by the broadening and reverberating influence of the Divine Victim of Calvary? Still, as from the beginning, blind souls receive their sight and lame souls walk, lepers of sin are cleansed and deaf hearts hear, and dead, damned spirits rise from their graves and hell at the summons of Him who is the Resurrection and the Life. We learn by failing and we live by failing, when we make God and His Truth the goal, and contend, not for triumph, but for light. "He was in the world, and the world was made by Him, and the world knew Him not." It always was so, and always will be so, from age to age, from culture to culture, till the end of time. When it becomes generally fashionable to be religious—for mere slumming is but a society disease, and does not count in the main current of things—Christianity will be doomed. No crucifixion could be quite so bad and ruinously fatal as that of patronage. When the drawing-room exhibits the Cross as a counter-attraction to the divorce court, the epitaph of Christianity will be written and

ready. But of this prospect we need entertain no apprehension. It is the unfashionable, and not the fashionable, that will regenerate mankind, and uplift the masses, and feed the hungry, and clothe the naked, and redeem the unemployed. Salvation will come, as it comes invariably, *for* the poor and weak *from* the poor and weak, and the honeycomb of life will be found between the ribs of death. The victories of mere worldly wisdom and of brute might have passed, and the new principle of meekness is now the conquering force. By the frailty of women, by the mouths of babes and sucklings, by the power of right and unarmed and unprotected charity, God fights His battles through us and wins them at the present day. It is His glorious failures that succeed—the broken remnants, the miserable minorities, the ragged regiments of the despised and rejected. And this constitutes the eternal paradox and the eternal stumbling-block. Every succeeding period must be shattered upon it before it can be made whole. But the Offence of the Cross is its best and its ultimate defence, and by the little leaven of the few elect and select will the total mass be quickened. But, as Emerson has said, “we balance one man with another, and the health of the State depends on the seesaw.” The incessant friction between conventionalism and dead orthodoxy on the one hand, and the lost causes and forsaken beliefs and impossible loyalties on the other hand—between the progressive and the retrogressive elements, the Everlasting Yea and the Everlasting Nay, the angel that affirms and the devil that denies—salvation somehow proceeds, and the business of souls is carried on. Now the positive factor rises in the ascendant and then the negative, and God in both stands glorified, and His cosmos keeps adjusting and readjusting itself to new religious relations. Just at present, from the Centre of Indifference and its simmering, seething murk of unconcern or cynicism, emerges the horrible suspicion that the Church of Christ has become the Church of the classes and their salaried servant. Labour grows sullen and estranged and darkly critical when it believes that the Gospel of to-day has one law for the rich and another law

for the poor—a relaxed morality and discipline for the former and a severe code for the latter. It sees no equitable common measure in judgment. The sins of the first, euphemized as errors and indiscretions and imprudences, and toned down and explained away, can always be atoned for by a big or bigger subscription; while the lapse of the last, however justified or extenuated by want or heredity or circumstances, are never inadvertencies, but terrible violations of law, human or Divine. And while the pulpit debases the moral coinage by its glaring respect of persons, and the preacher remains indifferent to the sovereign claims of supreme Truth, how can the people escape from their slough of indifference and rise to the dignity of some new and nobler spiritual affirmation? “For all the promises of God in Him [Jesus Christ] are Yea, and in Him Amen, unto the glory of God by us.”



Professor Ramsay's "Cities of St. Paul."¹

BY THE REV. W. EDWARD CHADWICK, D.D., B.Sc.

THIS last book of Professor Ramsay's is a further addition to that rapidly accumulating body of proof of how important it is that we should study the work of any great teacher in the light of the fullest available knowledge of the age and circumstances amid which he lived and worked. This is especially true of the writers of Holy Scripture. And the more carefully we pursue this method, the more surely shall we be convinced how essentially these were men of their own time, and how by serving to the full their "own generation" they performed an invaluable service for all time. With no one has this been more the case than with St. Paul. And I would venture to assert that no one can study this volume without coming to the conclusion that it is by rendering the best and most intelligent service to those among whom we live that we shall most permanently promote the cause of righteousness, which is the cause of Christ.

The book is divided into seven parts. The first deals with "Paulinism in the Græco-Roman World"; the next five deal respectively with the conditions of life at the time in the cities of Tarsus, Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Derbe, and Lystra; while the last part is entitled "St. Paul in

¹ "The Cities of St. Paul: their Influence on his Life and Thought." By W. M. Ramsay, Knt. London: Hodder and Stoughton. 12s.