

WHAT CHRISTIANITY
MEANS TO ME

A SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

BY
LYMAN ABBOTT

Till we all come in the unity of the faith and of the
knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man,
unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

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reëstablished that conception. They have overthrown it.

I no longer regard Jesus Christ as the Founder of a system; I regard him as the Giver of life. I still think that the various Christian creeds, rituals and churches are instruments more or less honestly intended to promote in the community the spirit and teachings of Jesus Christ. But I do not think that any creed or combination of creeds can adequately define Christian thought, or that any forms of worship constitute an adequate expression of Christian experience, or that any church or all churches united can be an adequate instrument of Christian activity.

There lies before me as I write the creed of Plymouth Church (Brooklyn) adopted in 1848. It is no longer subscribed by its members, but in 1860 assent was still required, and it fairly represents the theological opinions of liberal orthodoxy at that time. It affirms belief in one true God, Sovereign, Infinite in Power, Wisdom and Goodness, in the Bible as an authoritative rule of faith and practice, in the Trinity, in the Fall of Adam and in the

vicarious atonement. I had been commissioned as a Congregational minister, part of whose duties it was to teach a system of theology of which these articles were an essential part. But when I came to study the teachings of Jesus with my fellow students in this Congregational Bible Class, I found that he never mentioned vicarious atonement or the Fall of Adam or the Trinity, and while he often quoted the Old Testament and always with a respect if not with a reverence which he never paid to the traditional teaching of the synagogue, he never apparently relied upon it as an authoritative rule of faith and practice. He said little or nothing about the Power or Sovereignty of God, but much about his Fatherly care and forgiving kindness; nothing about a Trinity, though much about his own spiritual oneness with his Father; he condemned in no uncertain terms the sins of his time but never traced them back to Adam; he said much about self-sacrifice, but nothing about priestly sacrifice to atone for sin. He never offered sacrifice himself and never counseled his disciples to do so; and never required or referred to any sacrifice as a condition of the

would be cast out. His teaching was not theological but vital. He taught men, says one of his earliest disciples, how to live — soberly, righteously and godly, looking for the appearing of God. It has grown increasingly clear to me with the passing years that the most radical difference between the teaching of Jesus Christ and that of the churches is this: Jesus taught men how to live; the churches have taught men what to think: Jesus tested men by their lives; the churches have tested them by their beliefs.

The notion that Jesus organized a Christian church to take the place of the decaying Jewish church has very little evidence to support it. The word church occurs only twice in the Gospels, and the Greek word means assembly or mass-meeting. It would not be inapt to translate it "town-meeting".¹ In Galilee, finding the time too short and the work too large for his own unaided ministry, Jesus selected twelve from among his followers and commissioned them to preach in the villages while he preached in the cities.² Later, in the larger

¹ See next chapter.

² Compare Matthew 9:35, 11:1, Luke 9:6.

region beyond Jordan, he selected seventy itinerant ministers for a similar work.¹ The commission was essentially the same in both cases. In neither case was there a hint in the appointment that it was permanent, or that the ministers were to appoint successors, or were to continue their work after the designated service had been rendered. In neither case were the directions which he gave of a kind that are applicable to our time, and no church of our time endeavors to conform to them.

That he prescribed baptism and the Lord's Supper as permanent ordinances appears to me to rest on an equally slight foundation. Almost the sole evidence to support this opinion is the fact that they early became church ordinances, and the assumption that he must have foreseen and intended what in fact came to pass.

The history of baptism, as it is related to the teaching and preaching of Jesus Christ is very simple. Among the ceremonial washings common among the Jews, probably the one to which they attached the greatest importance was the baptism of proselytes. When a pagan desired to become a

¹ Luke 10: 1-17.

Christ carried out into the pagan world by his disciples appealed to universal instincts of humanity. That story inspired aspirations before unknown and showed that they could be realized; it created a new ideal of life by portraying it as a realized ideal; it awoke slumbering desires and transformed them into a resolute purpose. It did more; it came to the poor, the slave, the outcast and the despairing as Jesus had come to Lazarus and, like Lazarus, they came forth from their tombs, but still bound hand and foot with grave clothes. Christianity converted paganism, but paganism changed Christianity. The new life took on the forms of the old. Statues of pagan gods were renamed for the Bible heroes and Christian saints; pagan temples were converted into Christian churches; pagan festival days were retained as Christian holy days; pagan ceremonies were preserved but rechristened and given a new significance. The Christian Brotherhoods took on the form of organizations with which people were familiar. In Greek communities, where the democratic town meeting was not unknown, the churches were democratic or Congregational. In Jewish communities the converted

synagogue became a Christian church, but adopted the form of the synagogue, which was Presbyterian. As soon — and it was very early — as two or more churches in a city or moderately sized district came to coexist side by side, coöperation was desired in the interest of both fellowship and efficiency, and the minister of one of these churches became either by natural preëminence in character or by the choice of the others, an overseer over all the churches, and so the bishopric grew up. As the Christian religion became the official religion of Rome, it adopted the Roman form of government; the bishop of Rome became the head of an imperial church and bishops and archbishops became its provincial governors.

The teaching of the church inevitably felt the same influence. Christian thought could not affect pagan thought without being in turn affected. Paul warned his disciples against mistaking philosophy for religion, loyalty to opinion for loyalty to a Person, conversion of the intellect for the conversion of the will:— but his meaning was uttered in vain. In the Apostolic times the one condition of joining the Christian Brotherhood was loyalty to

looked upon with suspicion by his co-religionists as a heretic. But never did he apologize; never did he take a defensive attitude. He gloried in being a Jew, gloried in being a Christian Jew, gloried in his Convict-Leader, gloried in the cross on which that Leader had been put to death. His pride became an instrument of power and an equipment for service. His scarlet sin became white as snow.

Nor is this transformation of character wrought by the spirit of Jesus, Christ merely in the individual: it is also social and organic. The great upward and forward movements in human history are divinely inspired movements; the Democratic movement, the Emancipation movement, the Temperance movement, the present movement towards international justice and peace are all parts of that greater movement which we call Christianity. God is re-creating the world.

My realization of the fact that Jesus Christ does not promise remission of penalty but does promise remission of sin revolutionized my theology because it revolutionized my religious experience. Let me here in five definitions briefly define that revolution.

Salvation no longer means to me deliverance from

Hell and admission to Heaven; it means deliverance from Sin. Exemption from penalty without deliverance from sin would not be salvation. If a good man were to go to Hell and retain his goodness he would be saved. If a bad man were to go to Heaven and retain his evil nature, he would be lost. Heaven must be in us — Hell is in some. The Gospel is not the good news that guilty men may be saved from punishment, but the good news that guilty men may be made virtuous. In one word, Salvation is character.

Justification by faith no longer means to me that Christ has suffered the penalties of my sins and therefore if I accept his sacrifice God will treat me as though I were innocent although I am guilty; it means that Jesus Christ offers himself to me as my divine companion and if I accept his companionship I can be made virtuous although I have been guilty.

Atonement no longer means to me that Christ has made a reparation to God for the wrong I have done and therefore God is reconciled to me. It means that Christ has by his life and teaching interpreted God to me and by his personal presence

inspires in me the will to do my Father's will and so has reconciled me to God.

Regeneration does not mean to me a new faculty miraculously given to man by some magic formula, as baptism, or by some supernatural experience for which man must wait. In every normal man is the capacity for goodness and truth, for love and service, for hope and joy. But this sleeping capacity is naught unless it is awakened into life. It is a seed, but a lifeless seed until it is given life by a divine power above itself. So I might say to the seeds in my garden bed, You can never come into the kingdom of light and life and beauty until you are born from above, and all the while God's sun, which shines alike on the evil and the good, is waiting to give them life.

Incarnation means to me more than that the Spirit of God dwelt unrecognized by the world centuries ago for a few years in Jesus of Nazareth; it also means to me that the same Spirit still dwells in the world, carrying on now with the followers of Jesus the work of serving and saving men which the same Spirit carried on with Jesus then. Incarnation to me is not merely an historical episode; it is an