THE NEW TESTAMENT TODAY

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THE NEW TESTAMENT TODAY

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INTRODUCTION

The New Testament seems destined, in the age now opening, to play a greater part than ever before. Men of all schools of thought have come back to its ideas in their plans for the rebuilding of our civilisation after the wreck. Those who profess themselves most hostile to Christianity are yet convinced that the one hope for the world is to accept the broad Christian principles, far more seriously than has hitherto been done. In the so-called ages of faith the New Testament, with its counsels of perfection, was hardly permitted to interfere in the ordinary business of life. In our days, when the old beliefs seem to be tottering, it has become the most practical factor in the world's affairs. It will have more to say in the solution of the great modern problems, than all the schemes of our statesmen and economists. At the same time, the New Testament to which the world is now turning for guidance is not the New Testament of our fathers. To them it was a book of divine oracles, in which the whole rule of faith and practice was laid down once and forever. We have now learned to read it in the light of criticism as a book of the first century, affected at every point by contemporary ideas and beliefs, limited in its outlook by given conditions, reflecting the many changes which the church passed through in its early period of development. The traditional attitude to scripture has become a thing of the past, and no purpose can be served by well-meant endeavours to force men back to it. Nothing, indeed, has done more to discredit the book and

arouse suspicions of its message than those attempts to conceal or explain away the facts of its origin. The time has surely come when we should try to exchange the old attitude to scripture for one that will be more consistent with the results of modern enquiry. These results, it may be granted, are often one-sided, and in every matter of detail are open to revision. Those who are best acquainted with them will be the first to admit that they are by no means final. But the main conclusions at which modern scholars have arrived can no longer be questioned, and have to be taken into account in our estimate of the book. If it is to exercise its proper influence on the new age it must be presented as it really is, not as an ignorant piety has imagined it. The aim of the following chapters is to help, in some small way, towards the new presentation. The book of the primitive church was composed so long ago, out of so many strange elements, that it might seem to have nothing but a historical interest for the mind of our time. Yet it has proved itself,—and never more so than in these changeful days,—to be the most living of all books. Its conceptions of man's needs and duties, of his relation to God and to his fellow-men, have stood every test, and are likely to be enduring. How is it that the ancient book has this permanent value? It was formerly assumed that the riddle could only be answered by a theory of direct inspiration; but such a theory is no longer possible, nor is it necessary. Nothing essential is lost to the New Testament when we allow for the historical process whereby it came into being. Its permanent message becomes in many ways more intelligible, and can be applied more closely to actual needs and circumstances. In any case, the book must be understood in the light of modern knowledge before it can fully appeal to the modern world. In these days

especially, when men have begun to turn to it with a fresh earnestness for direction in those great issues on which the whole future depends, we cannot wish that they should look at it through any artificial medium. Most of our troubles to-day have come upon us because we have so often put illusions and pious fictions in the place of facts; and if we are to build again, on solid foundations, we cannot begin better than by forming a true judgment of our New Testament.

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CHAPTER I

The Right of the New Testament

FOR eighteen centuries our religion has been almost identified with the New Testament. The mass of men have been content to believe that in this book the whole meaning of the faith was set before them, and that their one duty was to follow its direction. But in our own day this religion of the book has been called in question. The Reformation, we are told, left its work half finished, or replaced the old bondage by a heavier one. With all its shortcomings the Church was a living organism, and could assimilate new thought, and adjust its message to changing needs and circumstances. When the Church was overthrown, the Bible was left as the sole authority. The mind of Christendom was confined inexorably within the bounds traced out for it in a former age.

In our time, therefore, the right of the New Testament has been seriously challenged, not only by enemies of Christianity, but by many who have its best interests at heart. They are persuaded that a misplaced devotion to the book has stood in the way of the religion, and is largely accountable for its failure to exert its due influence on the modern world. Their protest is worth considering, for it certainly contains a measure of truth. In any case it compels us to reflect more deeply on the nature of the New Testament, and on the reasons why we still accept it as the primary document of our faith.

It is pointed out, in the first place, that these writings all came into existence in the primitive age, before there had yet been time to examine the new message in all its bearings. The writers were dominated by ideas which we have outgrown, so that much of their teaching is now antiquated or positively misleading. For that part, they never intended to present the gospel in a manner that should be normative for all time. They were concerned with questions of faith and conduct which arose in little Asian or Greek communities two thousand years since, and had no thought of any wider audience. Why should our life to-day be still governed by this ancient book?

It is contended, on broader grounds, that the whole idea of a sacred book is a relic from the past. In an early condition of society, when the higher demands had still an imperfect hold on reason and conscience, it was necessary to support them by some divine sanction. Laws were imposed in the name of the national god. Customs and institutions were safe-guarded by sacred legends. In almost all the ancient societies we find something that corresponds to the Jewish conception of scripture. The beliefs and practices, the moral and social ideals which had approved themselves to the mind of the people were drawn up in a sort of code, which was regarded as divinely given and therefore unchangeable. This reverence for scripture, as we can now perceive, was of the utmost value in the education of the race. By means of it men were trained to acknowledge some other rule than that of caprice or the strong hand. They were gradually taught to discern an inward law which was just as real and binding as any that was forced on them from without. But may we not presume that the day of the sacred book is now over? Men perform their duty as citizens without needing to believe

that Magna Charta and the American Constitution are inspired documents, given at the hands of angels. And if the Christian discipline of all these centuries has gone for anything they ought to have reached the same stage in their religion. It may once have been necessary to compel their assent by the authority of a book, supposed to have come by immediate revelation. But to insist on the book now is to constrain our faith by the naive methods of a former age.

Another and more vital objection is sometimes urged. Not only is the idea of a sacred book no longer necessary, but it conflicts with the inner purpose of Christianity, and entails a dangerous confusion. With the New Testament in their hands men are unable to think of the gospel as anything else than a prescribed doctrine,—a code of rules and maxims, given from without. Yet this was precisely the conception of religion which Christianity set itself to destroy. Paul is never tired of declaring that we must walk by the Spirit, and of contrasting the letter which killeth with the Spirit that makes alive. Everywhere he insists that what we receive in the gospel is not a new law, however superior to the old, but a new spring of action, which takes the place of outward law. And here at least Paul was faithful to the teaching of Jesus himself. Jesus wrote no book and laid down no specific commandments. He sought to make men realise that religion is not a matter of rule and precept, but of fellowship with God, and inner harmony with His will. The effect of identifying his message with the New Testament has been to obscure for multitudes of people its essential import. They make it their aim not so much to attain to that will and temper which Jesus required as to observe what is written in the book. Too often in the endeavour to force their minds into full agreement with it they

have failed in that sincerity which is not the least of its demands.

Once more, it is maintained that as the religion of a book Christianity has been hampered in its free development. During the century that followed Jesus' death it showed a marvellous power of adapting itself to new conditions and embodying its message from time to time in fresh and living forms. It might have preserved this power through the centuries since, and so have kept itself always in sympathy with the world's movement. But this became impossible when once the New Testament was accepted as the sacred book. The world went forward while the church was fixed at its old moorings, committed to a form of teaching which became ever more distant and unreal. To-day, in the face of modern science and democracy, it has to proclaim its message in language that has never changed since the days of the Caesars, and this, more than anything else, has made its task a hopeless one. The message, whatever may be its value, is unintelligible to the new time.

Such are the arguments which are commonly brought forward, and many would hold, on the strength of them, that the New Testament ought now to be discarded, or at least given a subordinate place. The suggestion is sometimes made that if a book is necessary for purposes of Christian worship and instruction a new one might be put together which would be more truly representative. Paul and the evangelists were followed by many great teachers, superior in genius and equally endowed with the Christian spirit. Might it not be possible to retain some part of the New Testament and supplement it with passages from the poets and saints and thinkers who have given sublime utterance, all through the centuries, to the truth of Christ? A book of this kind would serve to remind us that revelation

has never ceased. It would keep us free from bondage to the letter, and enable us to grasp the great Christian ideas as they have expressed themselves in many diverse forms. Or is it necessary that we should associate our religion with any book? If we believe that God is always speaking, and that His message comes fresh to every age and every individual, why should we depend on the witness of other men? Is it not time that we should rise to the full Christian conception of a worship in spirit and in truth?

Now it cannot be denied that this prejudice against the New Testament is in some part due to a genuine feeling for the things that lie deepest in our religion. When we think of what often passes for Christianity we can see that the book has indeed been a hindrance. Men have put it in the place of the real message, and have made their loyalty to it an excuse for spiritual indolence. They have allowed the dead hand of the past to stifle them, and have mistaken things that were accidental and transitory for the very substance of the faith. But it does not follow that the New Testament must go because the traditional theories about it are no longer tenable. Those theories themselves, when we get back to their ultimate meaning, sprang out of a fact, which has impressed the mind of the church in all ages. The New Testament, more than any other book, has been life-giving. All Christian thought and activity have grown out of it, and have proved most fruitful when they were rooted in it most deeply. This was explained in former days by a doctrine of inspiration which we cannot now accept; but the fact remains, and we have to find a more adequate explanation. Taking the New Testament, as we now are obliged to do, in all the light which modern criticism has thrown on it, why must we still accord it a central place?

(1) For one thing, it stands for the element of permanence in our religion. Without it there can be little doubt that the Christianity of to-day would be linked with that of the past centuries by little more than the bare name. As it is, the church has changed its character many times over, the doctrines and institutions have passed from one phase to another, but the New Testament has remained the standard of Christian thought, and has ensured a continuity through all change. The different systems have all started from it, and have merged in it again when their day was finished. The inference has often been drawn that it has been a drag on religious progress; but surely the very opposite is true. Progress implies a consistency of aim and direction, without which all seeming advance can be nothing but wandering in a circle. By preserving the continuity of our religion in all the stages of its history the New Testament has been the main factor in progress. Not only so, but the faith and endeavour of the past have so entwined themselves around this book that it could not be thrown aside without incalculable loss. It must never be forgotten that the New Testament stands not for itself alone but for all that is grandest and most sacred in the life of nineteen centuries. To part with it would be just as much an impoverishment as to abandon our mother-tongue. It might easily be said of our language, as of the New Testament, that it has come down from a remote past, and gives currency, by its metaphor and vocabulary, to a multitude of wrong ideas. Ought we not to have done with this defective instrument, and engage a body of philological experts to make us a better language? Yet we hesitate to give up English for Esperanto, and the preference is not to be set down wholly to a blind conservatism. To be sure the language grew up at hap-

hazard, and breaks down at every point when we put it to a scientific test. But it has been the speech of our race for all these ages. It has become one with the wisdom of our great thinkers, with the poetry of Shakspeare and Milton, with all the glories of the most splendid history in the world. We want to keep it for these things, as well as for itself. Too much, no doubt, has often been made of the sentimental argument for holding to the New Testament, and it is justly answered that in times of great decision even the dearest monuments of the past may have to be sacrificed for the sake of some higher end. If a temple or a book or an institution comes between us and the truth, like a venerable tree that shuts out a house from the sunlight, it must needs go, however we may regret it. But the argument in question is more than sentimental. One of the chief functions of the New Testament has been to link the ages with each other, so that the best results of the past may ever be carried forward to enrich the future. Our religion, in the long course of its history, has drawn into itself all that was most worth preserving in ancient thought, in mediaeval piety, in the teaching of Reformers and Puritans, in the modern striving towards liberty. Around the New Testament as a centre these various contributions have gathered, and have blended gradually with one another. It is not too much to say that without this book we should have lost not only the original Christian message but much of the best thought and inspiration which have come to us from the centuries since.

(2) But there is another and weightier reason for attaching a paramount value to the book. Although it is a spiritual religion Christianity is none the less inseparable from certain historical facts, and therefore requires a document in which these facts of its origin

are duly set forth and attested. Many thinkers, indeed, have sought to detach it from the facts, in order that its religious message might be placed on a surer basis. They rightly point out that in actual events there is always a contingent element, which interferes with the purity of spiritual ideas. Moreover, historical evidence is at the best uncertain, and if we can hardly get at the truth of events of yesterday when they are reported by eye-witnesses, how can we rest our faith on the conflicting records of things done two thousand years ago? The first century was hardly ended when these doubts as to the historical setting of the gospel began to trouble the Gnostic teachers. They sought to free the work of Christ from its entanglement with human accident by making it wholly a transaction in the spiritual world. He himself became a principle of redemption: the story of his life was resolved into allegory: ideas were substituted for all that had come down in the tradition as outward events. A similar effort has been made many times since to abstract the gospel from its historical frame-work, and in this manner to secure for it an unassailable foundation. But it was nothing else than the reaction from the Gnostic mode of thought that led to the formation of our New Testament. The church was called on to decide, at the most critical turning-point in its history, whether the message could be separated from the facts out of which it had sprung, and this was seen to be once for all impossible. It had become clear that the attempt to make Christianity more spiritual by lifting it out of time would presently destroy it. So far from gaining in purity it was degenerating into a mass of wild speculation and magical rites; its virtue as a living faith was passing out of it. The church was made aware, not a moment too soon, that if the religion was to survive it must be anchored to its historical

origins, and for this purpose the records of the life of Jesus and of the primitive age were collected in an authoritative book. There is indeed a danger, as the Gnostics perceived, in confounding the inner purport of the gospel with a historical tradition, and we are learning, in our days, how much has been made essential that is only temporary and accidental. But when all is said it is not the weakness but the strength of Christianity that it came into being as a historical religion. If it had offered its message of redemption in some abstract form it would long ago have gone the way of those philosophies which have no foot-hold in reality, and sooner or later become meaningless. But it appeared from the first as the word made flesh. It took hold of a particular age in history, and showed how amidst these cramping conditions men could realise a great ideal and enter into fellowship with God. When you try to separate the gospel from what you choose to call the mere time-element you break the very spring of its power. Men are moved by it to-day because they know that from the beginning it has been bound up with the realities of human life. The more vividly they can picture to themselves how Jesus met his difficulties, how the Apostles worked in Rome and Ephesus, the more directly they can respond to the message as it comes to them now. This is one of the chief reasons why the New Testament must always maintain its primary place. Not only does it bear witness to the facts out of which Christianity arose, but it makes us feel that these facts have a religious value. The word is not in heaven or in the depths but nigh to us, in our lives and in our hearts. We can apprehend it in action, in a world which with all its differences was like our own, and this is the secret of its power.

(3) In the New Testament, then, the historical

facts are attested by immediate witnesses; and here we discover a further reason for its abiding value. Not only are the facts recorded in their outward setting, but they are understood and illuminated in a manner that was not possible at a later time. At first sight it might appear unfortunate that the classic book of our religion should be wholly composed of writings that date from its earliest period. An arbitrary line has thus been drawn between one age of the church and all the others. Multitudes have been led to believe that somewhere in the early part of the second century the Spirit all at once ceased its work of revelation, and that ever since we have been left without any sure guidance. It might fairly be argued that the writers of that early time were in some ways less fitted than those who came afterwards to grasp the full import of the gospel. It had not yet had time to unfold itself. It worked on a narrow stage, and had no opportunity of bringing its principles to bear on some of the most vital of human interests. The church in later times has been drawn into relation with art, with scientific enquiry, with the larger activities of society and the state; and in this first century book, written for a struggling sect which stood aloof from the world's great movement, it can find nothing to direct it. None the less it was a true instinct that fixed on these primitive writings and made them normative for Christian faith. Not only were the New Testament writers the immediate witnesses who vouched for the facts, but they preserved the first, overwhelming impression which these facts had made. At the time when they wrote, the echoes of Jesus' voice were still lingering; his personality, and the memory of his life and death were something more than a cherished tradition. They enable us to realise the effect of his message on those to whom it was still fresh and wonderful. It may

indeed be granted that the church has appealed to the testimony of its first teachers on grounds which we now recognise as mistaken. Because they lived on the very morrow of the life of Jesus it has been assumed that they received the gospel just as it had fallen from his lips, and put it on record, unsullied by any strange doctrine, for its security in after times. We now know that the personal disciples of Jesus had only apprehended his gospel in part, and that even in the first generation it came to be mingled with many elements that were foreign to its nature. But in at least two ways the earliest believers were qualified, as none after them could be, to understand the message. On the one hand, they were awake to its *newness*. They could feel the thrill of the pioneer who looks out from the peak on the untraversed ocean. In a few years more the Christian worship, with its visions and raptures, was to become a matter of routine; the marvellous doctrines were to be formulated in creeds and catechisms, on which rival theologians could exercise their subtlety. Christianity passed, like a new invigorating element, into the very atmosphere which men breathed, and became so mingled with the other elements that it could hardly be distinguished. But in that first age the gospel was literally the good news, and the surprise and exultation of good news can only be felt once. It is one of the chief services of the New Testament to our life as Christians that it preserves for us this first impression. Our minds have grown dull after the lapse of centuries to all that the new religion has meant for the world. When we turn back to the New Testament we find many things that are now strange to us, but everywhere there is the triumphant sense that light has risen out of darkness, that a divine power has taken hold of the lives of men and is working mightily. The thinkers

who came later were able to explore the gospel, and to define and elaborate its teaching far more fully than Paul and John. It is not presumptuous to believe that in our own time we have come to discern some aspects of it which have hitherto been overlooked. But the chief thing necessary is to keep alive our feeling for it as a revelation, through which we have knowledge of God, and of His will and purpose. To make this response to it we need to see it again with the eyes of those earliest teachers, on whom the ends of the ages had come.

But this sense of wonder which in its full intensity was only possible in the first days, carried with it a faculty of insight. It is no accident that the beginning of a religious movement is invariably its great period, when it produces its chief teachers and gives classical expression to its central ideas. Philosophy, art, literature ascend gradually to their golden age, by a long process of thought and experiment. But religion must leap to its goal by an intuition, or it will never reach it. The things it deals with are the ultimate realities, and the labour of reflection too often dulls the direct vision by which they are seized. This is the reason why at the very outset, in the ardour of the first enthusiasm, the church threw off those wonderful writings which make up the New Testament. They were written accidentally, by men who had little skill in the art of expression, and who could not devote themselves, in the stress of their practical work, to any sustained effort of thought. Yet we have only to contrast the New Testament books with those of the next two centuries, when the church had enlisted in its service powerful thinkers, with their full share in the best culture of the time. We feel at once that the creative impulse has died down. The writers repeat, more or less mechanically, a lesson

they have learned, and the real import of which they have imperfectly grasped. To understand what they wish to say in their dreary treatises we have constantly to go back to the New Testament. And we must go back to it still in order to make out the real significance of the Christian movement, right on to our own days. This does not mean that the New Testament gives the complete and final exposition of the gospel, and that all the after developments have gone astray. Its teaching at the best is fragmentary, and involves ideas and assumptions which were growing outworn even in that age. But in forms however imperfect it sets clearly before us the vital truths of Christianity. Later teachers have pondered on them and defined them, and related them to one another and to the new problems which have emerged from time to time. But the men of the New Testament discerned by an immediate insight the essential purport of the new message. To this extent we can still speak of an inspired book, which must always be the standard of Christian thought.

(4) We come, then, to the fundamental ground on which the claim of the New Testament must be based. When all allowance is made for those elements which detract from its permanent value it stands out, on its own merits, as the greatest of religious books. For eighteen centuries men have been testing it, and have tried ever and again to advance beyond it, but it has continued to hold its own. Its messages of comfort and warning still make a universal appeal. All later search for the true knowledge of God, the true principles of life and duty have been most fruitful when most in harmony with its teaching. It does not hold its place by virtue of any pious convention but because it has really proved itself, in human experience, to be the most helpful book in the world.

It would clear away much confusion if we could clearly apprehend the fact that the New Testament owed its position from the first to its intrinsic excellence. Much has been written on the history of the Canon, and from most of the books on this subject we rise with the uneasy feeling that the New Testament has no right to exist at all. For several centuries the church was quite uncertain what writings should be included. Some that were once recognised have now dropped out, no one can tell precisely when or why. Others that have now secured a place were for a long time regarded doubtfully. The collection as we have it was formed apparently on no definite principles. It was never sanctioned by any regular authority. All that we can ascertain is that about the middle of the fourth century the present books had come to be acknowledged by all Christian men as their scriptures. Modern attacks on the New Testament have naturally made much of this purely fortuitous manner in which it came into being. Why, it is asked, should we pay such peculiar deference to this book? Who gave it this authority? Why should we not accept as scripture all the early literature of the church, as well as these particular writings which came to be singled out by the play of chance? But the best vindication of the New Testament is just this fact that it was put together and accepted fortuitously. We cannot be sufficiently grateful that in the early centuries there was no official body of church leaders or theologians who could determine, by formal rules, which books should be included and which left out. The mind of the church was permitted to work freely, so that the process which gave us the New Testament was no other than that which has assured the survival of all great literature. Out of the many miscellaneous writings which had come down

from the earlier days a certain number were found, after a sifting that went on for some generations, to have selected themselves. They had proved, in Christian experience, to have an inner vitality, while others, which pretended to just as high a title, did not make the same appeal. As a rule there are no books so unprofitable, even from a religious point of view, as so-called "sacred books". From the Book of the Dead to the Book of Mormon they are little more than desert patches on the face of the world's literature. The reason is that they have been imposed by the fiat of some prophet or priesthood, and have been maintained by a superstitious reverence. The books of the New Testament won their place in an open field, by the free and deliberate choice of the whole body of Christian people.

It is well to insist on this fact, for nothing has so prejudiced men against the New Testament as the belief that it has been forced on them by some kind of official decree. Even when they accept its teaching they are apt to do so with a silent protest, as feeling that all this has been prescribed for them, and that no room is left for their own judgment. The church has done the book a very doubtful service by requiring that it must be received without question, as different in character from all other books. An impression has been created that it cannot stand by itself, and that the reverence for it would quickly disappear if it were not stamped as sacred. But the truth is that men will not respond to any book, whatever claim is made for it, unless it has virtue of its own. They cannot even be induced to read it. There are portions of the Old Testament which are reckoned in the Holy Bible just as much as Isaiah and the Psalms, and yet the devoutest reader passes them by. In the New Testament itself there are chapters in the Apocalypse and elsewhere which do not exist

for the ordinary man. If the whole book had been of this character it would long ago have been left to professional theologians, in spite of all theories of its supreme value. It has maintained itself because, like the Iliad and Hamlet, it carries its own credentials. Men have treasured it from the earliest days till now because it moves them, because it answers their needs and aspirations, because it truly pulses with a divine power.

The right of the New Testament must ultimately be grounded on this inherent worth of its message, attested as it has been by men of all races and classes, in all varieties of circumstance, in periods so different as the early centuries, the Middle Ages, the present day. The time has gone by when its claim can be rested safely on any other ground. For years past, in every field of thought and action, there has been a growing revolt against all outward authority, and in the days we live in it has become more pronounced than ever. So many systems that claimed a prescriptive right to our obedience have been found wanting that we are now suspicious of every such claim. This revolt, in its more violent forms, already shows signs of passing, but the temper that has inspired it will remain. The only authority which the future is likely to recognise is that which has its sanctions within itself. Rulers will have to show a personal title to sovereignty; institutions will stand or fall by their actual worth and result. The New Testament will require to prove its authority in like manner, and no tradition or dogma will do much to support it. Our mistake in the past has been to assume that it stood in need of such support. In spite of all professions of faith there has always been a secret fear that the book, just as it was, would not bear a too rigorous scrutiny. It was the product of a

distant time, and did not represent the highest culture even of its own age. It was not written in impressive oracular style, and did not appear, on the face of it, to have the proper dignity of a sacred book; so it seemed necessary to encircle it with peculiar safeguards. Men must be compelled to reverence it, or they might treat it with neglect. There are those even now who watch with anxiety the inroads of modern criticism, and would arrest them if they could. As one artificial prop and another is taken from under the book they are afraid that it may fall to pieces and with it the Christian religion. But the removal of these props has been a real service to the New Testament, and has strengthened its authority. We are now discovering with surprise that it can stand by itself. No other book has the same vitality. No other has expressed so clearly and profoundly the abiding laws of the spiritual life.

These are the chief grounds on which the claim of the New Testament must be rested, and they have always been the grounds, although it is only in modern days that we have learned to acknowledge them. From the outset Christian men were conscious of a unique power attaching to the book and were formerly content to attribute it vaguely to inspiration. We are now coming to perceive what the inspiration consists in. The book had its origin in the glorious dawn of our religion, when men were still in immediate contact with the life of Christ, and were awake to the newness and grandeur of his message. They were able to seize intuitively the truths which lay at the heart of it, and which could only impress themselves, in their whole force and vividness, on an age to which it had come as a sudden revelation. The New Testament thus appeals to us by qualities inherent in itself. Nothing can be more misleading than to contrast the written book with

the living Spirit, for the Spirit nowhere speaks to us so powerfully and directly as through the book.

This clearer sense of the true value of the New Testament has doubtless changed our attitude to it in many ways, and it will be some time before the church has fully adjusted itself to the new conditions. It will be necessary, for one thing, to approach the book, not with less reverence, but with more of human feeling. It was written by men like ourselves and the more we understand them as men, with difficulties and limitations and individual tempers for which we must make due allowance, the more significant will be their message. They wove it into a human experience, similar to our own, and therefore it comes home to us with power. Again, we have to read the book in its context with a particular age of history. Its message, whatever may be its permanent validity, was given in forms of thought and was fitted into conditions which belonged to that Roman world of the first century. Our task is to reinterpret the Christian thinking of that age in order to make it applicable to our own. It might often seem as if critical enquiry, in its ceaseless effort to discover the contemporary factors in New Testament thought, is dissolving it altogether. But the effort, when we consider it rightly, is a constructive one. To know the gospel in its essential principles we must be able to discriminate those things which have filtered into it from the influences of the time. Once more, in our reading of the book we need to carry with us a true conception of the meaning of faith. It was the most grievous result of the older doctrine of scripture that faith itself, for multitudes of people, came to mean nothing else than undoubting acceptance of everything written in the book. This idea still lingers, both within and without the church, and is more to blame than any

other for confusing the issues of religion. But faith, in the true meaning of that great word, is our response to the love of God, the demands of the moral law, the ideal set forth to us in the life and character of Jesus. It is this faith that must possess us in reading the New Testament. We are to feel that here the central teaching of Christianity is offered to us, and that our duty is to pierce through the letter to the truth which it has expressed in part.

So in the light of modern investigation we have been compelled to revise our estimate of the New Testament, and to rest its claim on different grounds. The change is still so recent, and has been so subversive of religious habit and opinion, that perhaps it appears more far-reaching than it really is. It might be compared to those revolutions which take place from time to time in the political world. A nation has been accustomed for centuries to regard some authority as sacrosanct, and all loyalties and social arrangements have become so entwined with it that its fall seems at first to be the end of everything. But the life of a nation does not depend on a set form of government. It is found by and bye that the titular authority has masked the real one, to which men have always rendered their obedience, and that by discarding it they have entered on a larger citizenship. Such, we may feel assured, will be the result of our changed attitude to scripture. Christianity does not consist in a book but in the message that lies behind the book. The New Testament will only grow in value as we understand its true function, and reach beyond the written word to the realities of our faith.

CHAPTER II

The Modern Interpretation

THE criticism of the New Testament can be best understood when we regard it as merely a phase of the great movement which has been in process ever since the reawakening in the fifteenth century. Right on to that time the world had been living under the shadow of the ancient civilisation. It was in the position of a colony which as yet has developed no culture of its own, and can set no aim before it but to preserve, under many disadvantages, the traditions it has brought over from the mother land. But a time came when the new nations which had been slowly struggling into existence, became fully conscious of themselves, and broke away from the tutelage of antiquity. The need was felt of re-examining all that had been handed down, and of pushing forward to something better. This assertion of itself on the part of the modern world was the beginning of criticism, in the larger sense of the word. One part and another of the inherited knowledge was boldly questioned, and so much of it was found wanting that men insisted on putting everything to the test. The science and philosophy and political theories of the ancient thinkers were all in their turn subjected to revision. In the Reformation the critical spirit assailed the ecclesiastical order, with the aid of weapons derived from scripture, which was still supposed to be secure from any possible challenge. But finally the accepted doctrine of scripture was itself re-

examined by the methods which had proved so effective in every other domain. This step was not taken without many protests and misgivings, and for a long time the critical tests were only applied to the Old Testament, which was less involved with primary Christian interests than the New. But the orthodox champions of fifty or sixty years ago who foretold that if criticism were allowed to invade the outworks it would soon find its way to the citadel, have been justified by the event. As we now look back we can see that the battle for the new principles was fought out on the Old Testament issue. The later discussion, though it has extended to questions that belong to the very substance of the faith, has excited far less bitterness than the forgotten controversies over the origin of the Pentateuch.

The critical movement, then, has gradually taken possession of the whole realm of modern knowledge, but the methods by which it works have necessarily been different in the different fields. In the study of scripture it has relied above all on the historical method. With our modern conception of the life of the race as a long, continuous development it is hard indeed to realise that history, as we now understand it, was almost neglected till recent times. Men were formerly content to look back on the past with little sense of perspective. They vaguely took for granted that in bygone times the world had been much the same as they saw it around them. No one felt it incongruous that Italian painters should throw biblical scenes into the setting of a mediaeval town or castle, or that the Greek and Roman heroes of French tragedy should wear the dress and utter the sentiments of the court of Versailles. Even the professional historians made no allowance for different conditions when they dealt with the facts of antiquity. They passed their judgments on men and enterprises in

accordance with the standards of their own day. Their histories, more often than not, were of the nature of party pamphlets, in which the issues of the past were confounded with those of the present, and utterly distorted. It is not till about the middle of the 18th century that we can trace the beginnings of the historical spirit. The discovery was made that the events of the past did not happen in a mere aimless succession, but grew out of each other, and that each period had to be understood in its relation to that which went before and that which came afterwards. Former writers had taken the old social structures as finished products, which they had only to describe and classify. The historian now perceived that it was his business to examine history in the making, and this new conception of the task of history involved a change of method. It was not enough to repeat the statements of older writers, harmonising them where they differed and presenting their story in a more vivid and attractive way. There must be an effort to get behind the conflicting statements and to collect and sift all evidence however trivial or indirect in order to ascertain the fact as it had actually happened. This new method was applied with ever more fruitful results to classical history and to the annals of each of the great modern nations. It became apparent that countless judgments which had hitherto passed without question had now to be reversed, and that things which had appeared inexplicable could be traced to quite natural causes. For a long time the biblical records were left undisturbed, but inevitably these also were brought to the test of the new method. There are still those who protest that our religion came into being supernaturally, and that the criticism which treats its origin as a chapter of history has gone beyond its province. But such complaints are inadmissible, for

Christianity by its very nature invites historical investigation. It rests itself on the claim that at a particular time a divine power entered the world and co-operated with the life of humanity. To do justice even to its spiritual message we have therefore to take account of the historical factors, and they can only be determined by the methods which have approved themselves in all other fields of history. This is now recognised by all fair-minded scholars, radical and conservative alike.

So for the modern enquiry the books of the New Testament, whatever may be their permanent value, are in the first instance historical documents, and have to be examined by historical methods. In former times the questions of the date and authorship and immediate purpose of the various writings were of subordinate interest. They were not neglected, for there was a presumption that in a great Apostle like Paul or John the voice of the Spirit was clearer and more commanding than in the secondary teachers. The church has always concerned itself with the origin of the books in order to assign them their relative places in the body of revelation. But the interest of modern criticism is of a different kind. It thinks of the books as reflecting a number of the phases of early Christian history, and seeks to discover in the light of them how our religion began, how it developed, what were the influences that chiefly moulded it in the crucial period of growth.

It cannot be said that any final conclusions have yet been reached on the various questions affecting the New Testament books. On some of the most important points opinion is more divided than a few years ago, and the general result of enquiry, in this field as in every other, has been to raise two new problems for every one that is solved. Nevertheless the broad facts as to the origin

of the New Testament have now been ascertained. It is fairly certain that the earliest of the writings are the Epistles of Paul,—all of them dating from the latter part of his missionary career, and bearing, in one way and another, on the practical needs of his mission. The collection of Paul's Epistles is supplemented by a number of similar letters of doubtful authorship, although the names of Paul himself and of other outstanding Apostles were attached to them in the church tradition. In the generation following Paul's death the first three Gospels were composed in their present form. Mark is the earliest, and was used as the ground-work of their narrative by Matthew and Luke, who combine it with other documents, and particularly with a record of the teaching of Jesus. The three Gospels, that of Mark as well as the other two, are of the nature of compilations, and to this fact their paramount value is due. As the work of secondary witnesses, who wrote many years after Jesus' death, they would carry little weight; but it can be demonstrated that their immediate authors did little more than piece together, with varying degrees of skill, the records which had been current in the church for a considerable time before. By establishing this fact criticism has performed a real service to Christian faith. Whatever may be doubtful about the life of Jesus we can now feel assured that in the main we are not dealing with vague legend but with history, preserved in documents that were drawn up so soon after the events as to be reasonably trustworthy. Moreover it is possible, by careful analysis and by comparison of the Gospels with each other, to distinguish between the primary and secondary strata of the tradition. Our life of Jesus has become shorter and more fragmentary than it once was; but we need be troubled no more with the uneasy doubt that it may all be a pious fiction. There

is a bed-rock in the narrative, and within certain limits we can determine it, which must be ascribed to the memory of first-hand witnesses. In the Synoptic Gospels we have the record of Jesus' own ministry, but the third evangelist has supplemented his account with another work, in which he traces the course of the Christian mission up to the time of Paul's arrival at Rome. Probably in this book also he availed himself of earlier writings, though for the all-important opening period they were sadly inadequate. As an historical record the book of Acts is far from satisfying, but is nevertheless of priceless value since without it we should know next to nothing of the beginnings of the church. The remaining portion of the New Testament consists of five writinigs assigned by Christian tradition to the Apostle John. Modern criticism would place them all in a period long after his death, and would attribute them to at least two different authors. Revelation is the work of some one who still holds the apocalyptic beliefs in their literal form, while the writer of the Gospel and 1st Epistle moves in another world of thought. He feels that if the Christian message is to make a universal appeal the primitive ideas must be resolved into those of Greek speculation and mysticism.

This, in the briefest outline, is the account which modern criticism has given of the New Testament writings, and it leads at once to several conclusions as to their nature. (1) In the first place they came into existence almost by accident, in response to the immediate needs that arose from time to time in the early church. Paul in his busy life could seldom visit the communities he had founded, and had to direct them on occasions of grave perplexity by letter. Teachers of the second generation could no longer describe the life of Jesus from their own knowledge, and the Gospels

were written to afford them a basis for their instruction. All the books arose in answer to some practical demand, and this, in no small measure is the secret of their vitality. They were not the work of secluded thinkers, who discussed the principles of the gospel in abstract theological fashion. Their teaching has reference always to definite situations, and the world of the first century was not so different from ours but that we can recognise our own difficulties and problems in those which were encountered then. The book which sprang so directly out of life still makes a living appeal. At the same time our reading of it has to be qualified by what we know of its origin. We have no right to take some maxim which Paul lays down for his converts in Corinth or Galatia and insist on it as an absolute rule for Christian thought and conduct. There may indeed be a permanent significance at the heart of it, but this can only be grasped when we allow for the peculiar conditions which the Apostle had in his mind. Many of the worst errors in the history of all Christian societies have been due to this failure to acknowledge the time element in the New Testament teaching. Slavery has been defended because the Apostles took for granted the economic system of their day; celibacy has been exalted as the chief Christian virtue because the early church believed that the end of all things was near, and that men and women should hold themselves free from all distracting interests. Ever and again at the present day the wildest social doctrines are advocated on the ground of texts that were addressed to a struggling, persecuted community in the first century. To obtain the guidance which the New Testament can afford us we must learn to read it historically. Its writers professed to do no more than apply the enduring Christian principles to the circumstances of their own time, and while the prin-

ciples are still valid we have to fit them into the changed conditions before they can help us in ours.

Again, the writings were not only called forth by definite needs, but had almost always a controversial motive. It used to be assumed that the New Testament came to us from a time before the church was rent by divisions, and this, for many people, was its chief claim to authority. They had here the absolute weights and measures of Christian belief. With this book in their hands they could escape from the turmoil of warring sects to the primitive age, when all the disciples were of one heart and one mind. But as we read it now, in the light of criticism, we discover, with a shock of surprise, that the church was never so much divided as in that initial period, when no rule of faith had yet been established, and when all the scattered communities stood jealously on their rights. Paul was the protagonist in a great conflict in which the chief Apostles took sides against him. Before he died he saw his own churches broken up into parties, bitterly opposed to one another. In all the New Testament writings, even in the Fourth Gospel which appears to move in a serene atmosphere, above all the petty quarrels of the day, we can discern a controversial interest. They may almost be regarded as pamphlets, written to support one side or another in the cause which had brought not peace but a sword. It has often been argued that writings of such a nature could have no abiding value, but this by no means follows. Dante is not ephemeral because his poem turns on a political issue which has long since been dead. Paradise Lost is all the more impressive because we can feel behind it the passion of a great controversy. One might almost say that all the supreme teachers, from Socrates onwards, have presented their thought against the background of some opposing view

for which we now care little. The New Testament is no less valuable because it is so largely bound up with the controversial issues of the day; but this aspect of it has always to be reckoned with in our judgment of its teaching. It constantly happens that in their desire to combat some particular form of error the writers state their thought one-sidedly, or develope it along special lines. To take only one example, the Pauline doctrine of Justification by Faith has been adopted by Protestant theology as the very corner-stone of the gospel. But can we be sure that it was primary even for Paul, although he insists on it so passionately? At the time when he wrote the church was struggling to free itself from Judaism, and in the effort to prove that the Law was no longer binding he was compelled to throw the whole weight on his idea of faith as the sole means of salvation; but if he had lived at some other time, or had been confronted with some other type of error, he might well have expressed himself differently. Even as it is there are several of his Epistles, closer perhaps to his personal religion than Romans and Galatians, in which the doctrine in question holds a quite minor place. As the products of controversy the New Testament writings almost all betray a bias of which we must take account. They present the gospel in its contrast to other forms of belief, some of which have now utterly disappeared, and the writers themselves, in their calmer moments, would have qualified not a few of their uncompromising statements. This has certainly to be done by us to-day, before we can frame a creed on the basis of the New Testament. There has never yet been a conflict in which the truth was entirely on one side, and we must seek to do justice not only to Paul and John but to those whom they declared in the heat of controversy to be the enemies of Christ.

(3) A still more important fact has been revealed to us, with increasing clearness, by the modern investigation. It was formerly the chief aim of the New Testament expositor to make out that the various books, for all their apparent inconsistencies, were uniform throughout. They had all been inspired by the one divine Spirit, and if they seemed at times to differ, or even to contradict each other, this must be due to our imperfect apprehension of what they really meant. Endless labour was expended on "Harmonies" in which a place was found for every incident and saying in the four Gospels. The doctrines of Paul were so interpreted as to correspond at every point with the Parables and the Sermon on the Mount. The plan adopted in the ordinary hand-books of New Testament theology was to gather texts impartially from all the different books and to fit them, like the fragments of a puzzle picture, into one consistent scheme of teaching. This attempt to reconcile the writings has now been abandoned. It is frankly recognised that they stand for different types of Christianity, and instead of trying to conceal the differences the modern scholar is anxious to set them in clear relief. Apart from the message of Jesus himself, as set forth in the Synoptic Gospels, there is the theology of Paul, the Johannine mysticism, the idealism of Hebrews, the moralism of James, the apocalyptic belief which never lost its hold and which found its classical expression in the book of Revelation. A number of other types are plainly suggested, ranging all the way from a Christianity which was hardly distinguishable from Judaism to the heresies in which the gospel was merged in heathen speculations. The old conception of a Christianity which flowed at first in one straight channel and broke into many diverging streams as the early faith declined has now given place to an

almost contrary one. It was in the later time that the varieties of Christian opinion began to coalesce, but the primitive church admitted of endless differences. Every teacher seems to have had his own interpretation of what was meant by the gospel, and the New Testament, so far from reflecting an original agreement is the record of this diversity of Christian thought. This is one of the most significant of the results which have now been established. In the light of it we can perceive, for one thing, that the atmosphere of the primitive days was one of liberty, such as the church has never since enjoyed. Orthodoxy, which at a later time meant much the same as faith itself, had no place in the earliest Christianity. There were a few broad convictions which every believer was supposed to hold, but each man was left free to ponder on them and interpret them for himself. The duty of *knowledge,* as we can see from Paul's Epistles, was hardly less important than that of faith, and a set creed which relieved a man of this duty would have seemed like a quenching of the Spirit, which was given to all. And when we look deeper we can recognise that this variety in early Christian thinking was inherent in the religion itself. Much has been said of the simplicity of Jesus' own teaching, and in this respect it has often been contrasted with the elaborate systems which were built on it later. Why can we not return from all the intricacies of the creeds to that divinely simple gospel? But the truth is that the teaching of Jesus, for all its matchless lucidity, was complex. Historically it had behind it the whole development of Jewish religion and of those other religions from which Judaism had been borrowing for more than a thousand years. And in himself Jesus was a many-sided teacher, far more so than Paul or Origen or those scholastic doctors whose works run to scores of volumes. He was

interested in life and religion in all their aspects, and although in his own sayings the elements are so exquisitely blended that all has the appearance of a seamless garment, woven of one piece throughout, his message had hardly been proclaimed to the world by its earliest missionaries when the complexity came to light. It was made still more apparent in the course of the Gentile mission. A hundred races, all of them with their diverse modes of thinking, were mingled together in the vast empire, and the intellectual movement was as varied and active as in our own time. The new religion was thrown into the midst of it, and found its converts among philosophers of all schools, votaries of all religions, moralists, social reformers, rich and poor. There were elements of its teaching to which men of every type of thought responded, and they gave it different interpretations which were all alike justified. The New Testament is the standing witness to this diversity of meaning which was manifest in the religion from the first. It is not too much to say that all the phases of Christian belief which are represented in the church to-day have their prototypes in this book which was written within the century after Jesus' death. The plain man is often bewildered when he thinks of the numberless sects into which Christendom is divided, and when he finds them all supporting their opposite views from the New Testament. But the truth is that they all have this right of appeal. To condemn any of them as non-Christian is to condemn the primitive church and the book which speaks for it.

(4) The modern enquiry has not only laid bare a great variety of types in New Testament thought, but has proved beyond doubt that in that early time the religion was passing through a rapid development. It was the old assumption that no real change can have

taken place in Christian doctrine until the New Testament period was well over. Paul, it was admitted, thought somewhat differently from the earlier Apostles, and John from Paul; but these differences were set down partly to individual temperament, partly to the widening and deepening of Christian experience. As time went on it was natural that the church should advance to fuller perception of the meaning of Jesus; but that Christianity should suffer any real change in the course of two generations seemed on the face of it to be out of the question. During all that time the personal disciples of Jesus or their immediate followers were still alive, and could at once challenge any departure from the faith. In any case the time was too short for anything that could rightly be called a development. We have only to examine the subsequent history to see how gradually any change was effected even in the details of belief. One prevailing type of doctrine held the field for the whole of the Greek period; the Latin Christianity inaugurated by Augustine was dominant for a thousand years; Protestant theology still keeps to the lines marked out by Luther and Calvin. Is it conceivable that in the course of a single life-time, when so many restrictions were still operative, the religion should in any serious way have altered its character? It does, at first sight, appear incredible, but we must remember that it is just in their early periods that movements of any kind are most liable to change. Nothing as yet has taken rigid shape, and processes which will afterwards require generations are carried through, almost unnoticed, in a few weeks or days. From all that is known of the early Christian society we can infer that it was susceptible, in a peculiar degree, to change. It refrained on principle from all hard and fast regulation, leaving everything to the direct control of the

Spirit. It was divided, almost from the first, into a number of separate communities, each of them following its own path, with little interference from the others. Above all, in its eagerness to advance the mission the young society adapted itself, in every possible way, to the varying conditions amidst which it was thrown. The Apostle who became all things to all men if by any means he might save some was a true representative of the church, as it grew up in centres so different as Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Rome. That the religion was greatly changed even within the life-time of the first disciples is by no means improbable, and we have only to read the New Testament with an unprejudiced mind to discover evidence of the change. We can see beliefs which were at first central falling gradually into the background, and conceptions which had no place at all in the earlier message becoming ever more prominent. Nothing, for example, is more certain than that the primitive disciples thought of Jesus as the Messiah, who would return almost immediately in visible form to judge the world and establish a new order. By the end of the century the Messianic idea, with all that was involved in it, has fallen out of sight. Jesus is now the eternal Word, who imparts to his people his own divine nature. The glorious return, the Judgment, the Kingdom of God have become symbolical of inward and spiritual realities. How had this transformation of the original beliefs been accomplished? In part, no doubt, it was the result of a natural growth from within. As men reflected on the message of Jesus they learned to see in it meanings that were at first concealed, and to divest it of those traditional forms which had never been more than a shell or scaffolding. In part, too, it was due to changed conditions in the life of the church. The little brotherhood had grown into a vast society; the

early difficulties had given place to others of a totally different kind; the enthusiasm of the first days had waned, and the primitive hopes had lost their appeal. But a closer study of the New Testament has left little doubt that the influences at work within the church were reinforced by others, still more decisive, which acted from without. No belief was held more firmly by the older theology than that our religion had always kept aloof from the surrounding Paganism. Admittedly it had been transplanted at an early date to Gentile soil and had become far more a Gentile than a Jewish religion; but by a special miracle it was supposed to have grown wholly by itself, without any foreign admixture. We are now beginning to learn that no charmed circle of this kind was drawn around primitive Christianity. While it conquered the Pagan world it also assimilated from it much more than has ever been suspected, and this was in no small measure the reason of its victory. More will have to be said later of this inter-action of Christian with Pagan ideas, but this, it is practically certain, was the chief cause of that rapid change which can be traced in the New Testament.

In all these ways, then, our conception of the book has been modified by the critical investigation, and the fact has now impressed itself on the mind of the church at large. For the moment there is undoubtedly a widespread sense of misgiving. Men are disposed to feel that the Bible as they knew it has ceased to exist, and are doubtful whether they should turn their resentment on the church which has held mistaken opinions or on the scholars who have corrected them. This mood, we may be sure, will only be temporary. The new discoveries, as has been shown already, have not robbed us of the New Testament, but have merely compelled us to look more closely into our reasons for prizing it.

May we not say, indeed, that it has gained a larger significance from the knowledge we now possess as to its character?

(1) For one thing, it has become a more comprehensive book, in which all the varieties of Christian thought and temperament can find something that answers them. In every age there have been many natures, often the most sincerely religious, which have been repelled from Christianity by the effort to force their faith into one particular channel in which it would not flow. They were assured by their spiritual teachers that this approved type of belief was the only genuine one, and that the New Testament gave its sanction to this and to no other. If they still held to Christianity they did so with an acute sense of discomfort, professing a faith which was external to them and in which they could not move with entire sincerity. It is much to have learned that the New Testament is far broader than some of its too zealous champions have been able to recognise. The book, as we can now read it, is the work of many minds, which differed widely from each other, and were not afraid to think of the gospel differently. Not only so, but we can see that this freedom of interpretation was encouraged, as one of the best evidences than men were truly following the guidance of the Spirit. The New Testament which was so long made the barrier against all free activity of faith, has now been restored to its rightful place as the charter of liberty. We cannot turn its pages without being reminded that Christian experience can be of many kinds, that Christian thought may travel by many paths, separate from one another and yet leading alike to the centre.

(2) Further, we have learned to think of Christianity as of something that grew, and was responsive to all influences that were able to unfold and enrich it.

The New Testament writers as we used to conceive of them, were oracular voices, proclaiming a message which had been given once for all, and which had henceforth to be preserved as free as possible from all contamination. As we see them now they were men like ourselves, conscious that they knew only in part. They were continually trying to make the truth clearer to their own minds, and welcomed the light, from whatever quarter it might come, which could illuminate it for them more fully. Everywhere in the book we are made to feel that the revelation is still in process. From the knowledge they have already the writers are anxious to press on to higher knowledge, and their one concern is to keep their minds always open to new suggestions from the Spirit of God. We can no longer go to the New Testament as to a store-house of infallible texts, but we need not treasure it the less because it makes no claim to finality. On the contrary, it marks out for us the road which our religion must always follow, and which it has never deserted without losing something of its vitality. From age to age it must take into it new elements, and express itself in new forms. To-day more than ever before everyone is conscious that the doctrines fixed many centuries ago have ceased to be adequate, and that Christianity is in danger unless it can adjust itself to the new outlooks and grow with the growing world. The church can only be helped in its most urgent task when it comes to realise that the New Testament does not profess to be more than a beginning. It was written by men who were moving with their time, and who were looking forward to an ever larger disclosure of the truth of Christ.

(3) Once more, the work of criticism has taught us to discern more surely what our religion means, in its essential message. For ages it was virtually identified

with the body of teaching set forth in the New Testament, but this, as we have now discovered, was tentative at the best. The writers were trying to define something for which they could find no adequate language. They availed themselves of symbols and images, of traditional beliefs and ideas borrowed from the current philosophies, and sought in this way to make the new faith intelligible to themselves and others. As we look back on their work we see that it was imperfect. Their symbols, at this distance of two thousand years, have lost half their meaning, their philosophies belong to a world of bygone thought. Christianity is not to be confused with those attempts to define it which have come down to us in the New Testament writings. It consists not in formal doctrines but in a new feeling towards God, a new attitude to life, a condition of heart and will. These things can never be accurately expressed in terms of doctrine. At the most they can only be suggested, and the forms in which they are so suggested will necessarily vary with each succeeding age. In the ancient world men could best convey their highest religious perceptions through a mystical philosophy, in the Middle Ages through sacramental rites, in our times, perhaps, through the effort towards social justice and well-being. Christianity is something other than any of those expressions in which it is clothed from time to time, and the criticism which has laid bare the time element in the New Testament has compelled us to grasp this truth. We have learned to seek the reality of the New Testament teaching not in its specific doctrines but in that which lies behind them,—in the moral and religious ideal which they seek to interpret. Our task, as we are coming at last to realise, is not to take over the opinions of those old teachers ready-made, but to do in our own time what they did in theirs. How can

we possess, with something of their fulness and intensity, the Christian spirit, and manifest it in such forms as will appeal most directly to the minds of men?

It cannot be granted, therefore, that the modern enquiry, much as it has changed our estimate of the New Testament, has impaired its religious value; yet in one respect the misgivings which are so widely prevalent are not without foundation. The enquiry has achieved its ends by use of the historical method, and this method is beset with a special danger. As we read not a few of the more recent books on the origins of Christianity we cannot but feel that the authors have lost sight of the result in their occupation with the process. They have much to say about sources and influences, about all the different phases of the development, but with the thing that developed they do not concern themselves. It seems indeed to dissolve altogether in the various factors which helped to produce and mould it. This is the weakness of the historical method in whatever field it is employed. It tends to destroy our feeling for absolute values. The fact or idea in question is not so much explained as explained away by the dissection of its antecedents and consequences. In many directions to-day there is a revolt against the dominance of the historical method, with its tacit assumption that processes alone are worth considering. We are growing weary of the type of scholarship which fastens on a great work of literature for the sole purpose of discovering what the writer borrowed, and how far he was acted on by the social and literary conditions of his age. We feel, and the feeling is surely a just one, that whatever may have been the genesis of the poem it has a worth of its own, and has finally to be judged by its excellence as a work of art. All the other enquiry is futile unless it helps us somehow to form this judgment.

In like manner it is not enough to consider how great characters and great actions were related to their particular historical setting. They are something in themselves; they excite in us an admiration, and inspire us with a faith and courage which have little to do with the given surroundings out of which they emerged. Most of all in the study of our religion we have become conscious of the limitations of the historical method. To examine Christianity as a phase in the spiritual life of the race,—to analyse the diverse elements of tradition and thought and belief that entered into it,—all this has helped us. But it is valuable only in so far as a light is thrown on the nature and purpose of the gospel itself. Here in the New Testament we have a certain conception of man's life, in its ultimate meaning; and to take this conception apart, and describe it as at this point Hebraic, at this other as Greek or Oriental does not greatly interest us. What we wish to know is the value of the conception, however it came to be, and all the other questions must be subsidiary. The older method of New Testament study, with all its shortcomings, was at least concerned with the substantive message of the book. It offered no account, or a wrong one, of how the different writings were composed, and of the ideas which coloured their teaching; but it sought to interpret the book as the manifesto of Christianity. No wonder that men ask themselves sometimes, when they are confused by the perplexities of modern criticism, whether it might not be well to return to the older way.

It may indeed be granted that for the time being the effort to trace the history of the New Testament ideas has often made us oblivious of the ideas themselves; but there is no reason why the one method of study should exclude the other. The life of a great man is something different from the influences that went to

shape it, yet when we know what they were and how he responded to them we understand him better. The Divine Comedy and the Gothic cathedrals mean more to us, even as works of art, when we have traced their origin and considered how they summed up their age. And the historical study of the New Testament is necessary for the true appreciation of its religious message. No amount of critical research is of much avail unless we bring to our reading of the book those spiritual sympathies to which alone it can yield its secret. But our sense of its significance for all times ought only to be the keener after we have watched it growing, in its native soil.

CHAPTER III

The New Testament as a Product of its Time

THE modern enquiry into the New Testament has now been in process for about a century, and has reached a few broad conclusions which are no longer open to question. It is certain that the writings must be understood in their relation to history, that they represent a number of different types of teaching, that they illustrate the marked change which came over the religion even in the life-time of the Apostles. Within certain limits the nature of this change, and the purpose and character of the several writings have now been ascertained. The field was once open to all manner of fanciful guesses, orthodox or heretical in their tenor, and occasionally we still hear belated echoes of these vagaries. But they have ceased to rouse any feeling save that of impatience in the competent scholar. He is aware that the boundaries of rational judgment on the New Testament documents have now been definitely mapped out.

It is otherwise, however, when we turn from the broad results to the problems in detail. Here, it must be admitted, opinion is still in flux, and there is scarcely a question about the writings or the history reflected in them on which there is full agreement. The further criticism advances the more problems it brings to light, and the more doubt is thrown on previous solutions. This has often been made an argument against the validity of the whole critical method. Why, it is asked,

should we trouble with these new theories which cancel out each other? A conclusion put forward to-day as the last word of scholarship is pretty sure to be overturned to-morrow, and on such a quicksand of conjecture how are we to build our faith? But the very fact that criticism is always changing its position is, on a deeper view, one of the evidences that its method is the right one. Finality was only possible when the New Testament was lifted out of the sphere of life, and interpreted abstractly by means of theological formulae. As soon as we set it again in relation to living forces everything becomes open to question, and to ever more searching question as we get closer to the facts. Life is always baffling; no key can be devised that will fit precisely into all the intricate wards. If a time ever comes when scholars are in complete agreement on every New Testament question we may be certain that they have lost the true instinct for their work, and have grown content with mechanical answers that settle nothing. It is indeed the besetting danger of criticism that it is tempted, ever and again, to rest in some given solution as final. The prestige of a distinguished scholar causes his view to be accepted, for years together; and the breaking away from it, even in a false direction, has always meant a return to reality.

At the beginning of the present century one of the points had been reached when the work of New Testament criticism seemed to be nearing completion. After long debate a theory of the primitive age had been evolved which answered, apparently, to the known facts and was fairly consistent and intelligible. To be sure there were a few difficulties which the theory failed to remove, but the writers who insisted on dragging them forward were looked on with disfavour, as troublers of the general harmony. Then all at once discoveries were

made which had the effect of starting the discussion over again, almost from the beginning. It is strange indeed that after a century of unremitting work on the part of thousands of scholars, who seemed to have exhausted every detail of the subject, these far-reaching discoveries were still possible. This experience of our own time is sufficient warning that we can never assume that the last word has been said on the New Testament. There is always the chance that new light will be thrown on it from unexpected quarters and compel us to revise our most assured conclusions.

The recent discoveries have been due, in no small measure, to a more intensive study applied to the New Testament writings themselves. It is easy to ridicule the work of the painful commentator, who brings his microscope to bear on every phrase and word, almost on every letter of scripture, with little regard, it might often seem, to the larger issues. But this labour, like that of the chemist on his atoms and molecules, must always prepare the way for the great advances. Some of the cardinal problems of New Testament history and thought are still awaiting their solution until we can ascertain more definitely what the writers meant by particular words.

But the analysis of the documents themselves would have carried us little further had it not been for the help which came from the outside. It is probably to this extraneous aid that we must now chiefly look for the illumination of the New Testament, and in this respect fortune has been kind to us in recent years. Manuscripts, inscriptions, monuments, innumerable relics of the ancient world have been coming to light, and there is good reason to believe that this enrichment of our knowledge is only beginning. The Eastern countries which the war has now brought within the com-

pass of civilisation have treasures still undreamed of to yield up to the scholar. But we must never forget that it is the investigation of the New Testament itself which has enabled us to profit from all this added knowledge. For generations men had before them a great mass of evidence surviving from the early centuries which they never thought of using. They were possessed with the idea that the New Testament stood wholly by itself, so utterly apart from the age out of which it sprung that the contemporary witness was not worth examining. Our interest in that age and our insight into the records it has left us have now been sharpened by what we know of the true nature of the New Testament. Things that were nothing formerly but additional lumber for the museums are so many fragments of that old world which gave shape to Christianity, and we examine them with eager attention for the clues they may afford to still vital problems.

For the modern scholar, then the New Testament is a product of its own age, and he has learned to explore the history and thought and religion of that age for the purpose of understanding it. His interest has naturally been drawn, in a peculiar degree, to the life of the Jewish people in the time of Christ and the period immediately before. It was one of the gravest errors of the older scholarship to connect the New Testament directly with the old, paying no heed whatever to the long interval between, in which Jewish religion had undergone some momentous changes. The teaching of Jesus, as everyone would now acknowledge, was affected not merely by the Old Testament but in a still great measure by the later Judaism. Writings which were formerly branded as apocryphal and were passed over as worthless because they arose long after Old Testament times have now assumed a first-rate importance.

The interest in this later Jewish literature has called attention to numerous other documents of the same kind which had fallen entirely out of sight. As a result of this new line of study the Gospels can now be read in the light of contemporary ideas and beliefs. Instead of interpreting Jesus by creeds which were formulated long afterwards, and which he himself would not have understood, we can see what his teaching meant to the people of his own land and day. Some aspects of it have thus become intelligible for the first time.

A closer attention has been directed not only to the Jewish but to the early Christian literature. It has been the custom to draw an arbitrary line between the writings comprised in the New Testament and those which had been excluded, although they dated from the same age or shortly afterwards. But we now realise that the canonical books were selected for no other reason than their superior excellence. The whole literature must be taken together if we would fully understand the world of thought in which the writers of the New Testament moved. Even the writings which were condemned as heretical belong to the same general movement, and serve to illustrate not a few of the tendencies which can be discerned in Paul and John. By fortunate accident a number of lost works of early Christian literature have been recovered, just at the time when scholarship had learned to value them, and a vigilant watch is being kept for others. For purposes of investigation the distinction of writings within and outside of the Canon has now been abandoned. The New Testament books for the modern scholar are only the outstanding peaks of a large literature, which must be considered as a whole before we can justly estimate the meaning of the Christian movement.

But perhaps the chief illumination has come not

from Jewish or specifically Christian sources, but from our larger knowledge of the conditions of life and religion in the first two centuries. Apart from the supreme fact that it saw the birth of Christianity, this period has always fascinated the historian. It was the culminating age of the ancient world. Nearly all the elements of later civilisation can be traced back to it, and in some ways its life was richer and more harmonious than that of any subsequent time. But it has hitherto been known to us almost wholly from the classical writers, who reflected the mind and habits of a cultivated minority. Only within our own time have we grown fully conscious that there was also a life of the common people, more interesting in itself than that of the privileged few, and far more significant in its bearing on the Christian mission. It was among the artisans, the tradesmen, the soldiers, the varied population that crowded the poorer districts of the great cosmopolitan cities, that the new religion made its most notable progress. If we knew more of this obscure life which has hardly left a record in the formal histories, much that is dark in Christian development would be explained. Within the last generation this missing knowledge has been flowing in upon us from many sides, and it is now possible to construct something like a true picture of that vanished world in which Christianity achieved its first victories. By this means our previous conceptions have not only been filled out and vivified, but in some important respects have been transformed. It used, for instance, to be taken for granted that the period was one of moral and spiritual decay, in consequence of the breaking up of the old religious sanctions. From numberless passages of the literature it was clear that beliefs which had once been vital had now become nothing but artistic ma-

terial, or were held up to open derision. The success of Christianity was commonly explained from this spiritual deadness which had fallen upon the world. Men were conscious everywhere of a great void in their lives, and welcomed the inrush of the new faith which replenished it. This explanation was on the face of it improbable, for in all ages God has been found of those who sought Him. A mood of indifference or blank scepticism has never yet been responsive to a religious message. We have now discovered that these first centuries, so far from being spiritually dead, marked an age of revival. The classical Paganism had indeed lost its hold on the people, but its place had been taken by religions which had come in from the East, with impressive rites and symbols, and had blended themselves with the high speculations on which the Greek mind had been exercised since Plato. The world was full of strange cults, linked on the one hand with primitive nature-worship, and on the other with a mystical and often a profound philosophy, and this re-birth of religion was one of the grand characteristics of the age. Just as there are periods of discovery, of literary achievement, of political progress, so there are periods when the religious impulse is peculiarly active. No one has yet accounted for these tidal movements in the spiritual life of the race, and the ultimate causes will probably lie always beyond our knowledge. But all experience proves that in religion, as elsewhere, there are ages of revival, and it can hardly now be doubted that the first century was one of them. Christianity won its triumph because it appeared in such an age.

Of late years, therefore, we have learned to read the New Testament in a larger context than was formerly thought necessary, and much in the record has taken on a new significance. In two directions more especially the older conclusions have been completely changed.

(1) On the one hand, the teaching of Jesus himself has been interpreted along new lines. The scholars of the last generation had satisfied themselves that he was the leader in a great prophetic revival, and that his primary interest was in ethical and spiritual ideas. In order to present them more vividly he availed himself of certain current conceptions, filling them, at the same time, with a new content. He announced the Kingdom of God, which meant for him at once an inner harmony with God's will and a new social order, which would realise the divine will on earth. As the inaugurator of this Kingdom he called himself the Messiah, although he attached a new sense to this traditional Jewish title. The forms in which he conveyed his teaching were thus regarded as consciously symbolic or imaginative, and the chief aim of the interpreters was to determine the meaning which he sought to express by them. But now, with our fuller knowledge of the Jewish apocalyptic literature, it has become impossible to understand the Gospel teaching in this metaphorical sense. It is apparent that for at least a century before the time of Christ the hopes of the Jewish people were directed to a new age or Kingdom of God, which is described in the same language as we find in the Gospels. There was a belief that the present order of the world, with all its evil and sorrow, would shortly come to an end; the living and dead would be brought up for judgment before God, or the Messiah who would represent Him; the righteous would be set apart for eternal life in a renovated world. These conceptions meet us constantly in writings which belong to the time of Jesus, and can it be supposed that he mystified his hearers by applying the familiar terms in some new esoteric sense, known only to himself? Must we not rather assume that his message, up to a certain point, was the same as that of

the apocalyptic writers? He took up the expectation of a new age, and declared that it was just at hand, and that he himself would be in some way instrumental to its coming. In view of the great crisis which he saw approaching he called on men to conform their wills to that will of God which would alone prevail in the future. That Jesus fell in with those apocalyptic ideas of his time is now conceded by most modern scholars, and his teaching can certainly be best explained when it is set against this background. This is true not only of his direct references to the Judgment, the coming of the Son of man, the eternal life appointed to the righteous, but even of the purely ethical and religious teaching. He does not speak as an abstract moralist, laying down the principles of the moral law. He has always before his mind the picture of a new order of things, shortly to be established, and seeks to bring men into such a condition of heart and will that when it comes they will not be strange to it. To many people, certainly, it has come with something of a shock to think of Jesus as accepting those contemporary beliefs which have become to our minds so fantastic. Can it be that he was mistaken as to the nature of the Kingdom, and the time and manner in which it would come? Can it be that he conjoined his teaching with those strange outworn conceptions, and if so must we not admit that its value for us is gravely diminished? But these objections are not hard to answer. If Jesus was to impart his message to men at all it was inevitable that he should employ forms of thought which would in course of time grow obsolete. That has been the fate of all great thinkers, and the value of their work is not on that account impaired. For that part, it was fortunate indeed that the forms offered to Jesus were the loose, imaginative ones of Jewish apocalyptic, and not the

philosophical categories which were adopted later. His language, though much of it has lost its literal import, has the advantage which the language of symbol always has over that of abstract thought. The definitions of the creeds have grown out of date, along with the philosophies which produced them, but each new age has been able to attach its own meaning to the Kingdom of God. We can still repeat the prayer of Jesus, "Thy Kingdom Come", without any feeling that it echoes the aspiration of a bygone time. Our longings for moral perfection, closer fellowship with God, peace and justice in the world around us, can all be expressed in the form employed by Jesus. The form, in any case, must not be confounded with the substance. Jesus looked forward, like the apocalyptic teachers, to a visible consummation of the Kingdom of God, but the Kingdom, as he conceived it, was not merely the good time coming, when the earth would be more fruitful and beautiful, and men would be set free from all that now darkens and oppresses them. He thought of the Kingdom in its spiritual aspects as that condition of things when men would know God and obey Him gladly and willingly. The apocalyptic beliefs were like a screen against which he could project his conception of the ideal life and the Fatherly will of God. It cannot be said that the permanent value of Jesus' teaching and the greatness of his personality have in any way grown less because we understand more fully the mode in which he envisaged his supreme task. We have indeed become aware of the time element in which he worked, and must allow for this disturbing factor in our estimate of his message. But the message itself remains what it always was, and if anything is more intelligible and more real because we can set it against its historical background.

(2) More important, in some respects, and more

subversive of all traditional ideas has been the discovery that from an early time our religion was strongly affected by what we have been wont to regard as heathenism. It has commonly been supposed that Christianity made its way into the Gentile world as an exotic religion. Paul and the other Apostles have been compared to missionaries who in our day proceed to India or China with a message so foreign to the mind of the people that something like a new language has to be devised for the purpose of imparting it. But it has now been realised that the early teachers, although for the most part of Jewish race, were themselves children of the civilisation which they set out to transform. They had been moulded by the influences not only of the Old Testament and the Synagogue but of the Roman world in which they lived. It is not necessary to suppose that they were versed in Greek literature and philosophy, or had made direct acquaintance with the prevailing cults. In every age the doctrines of the schools find their way ere long into the market-place, and in the first century, with its ardour for discussion and keen intellectual interests, this diffusion of ideas was probably more general than among ourselves.

The conviction that early Christianity had deeper roots in the life of the time than had hitherto been suspected was first brought home to scholars by linguistic study. The Greek of the New Testament differs widely from classical Greek in structure, grammar, vocabulary, and the inference had always been drawn that it must be regarded as a sort of jargon, employed by Jews who had to express themselves in an alien tongue while they thought in their own. But modern exploration, especially in Egypt, has brought to light a host of documents belonging to the common life of the people,—private and business letters, school exercises,

casual memoranda,—which are evidently written in the ordinary colloquial language, and are marked by just the same turns of expression as we find in the New Testament. The fact has now been placed beyond all doubt that it is the literary writers of the time who use a jargon, in their desire to hark back to the models of the classical age, while in the New Testament we have the living idiom. In its outward form, at least, it is not an exotic work, thrust by a foreign race on a world to which it can only have been half intelligible. Paul wrote to the Corinthians and Galatians in just the same language as his readers themselves made use of in their everyday life.

In view of this fact the question inevitably arose, if it was so with the language might it not be the same with the contents? An explanation began to offer itself for numerous features in New Testament thought which had escaped notice, or which had baffled all enquiry so long as the book was considered a purely Jewish product. Why, for instance, had sacramental ideas asserted themselves so early in this spiritual religion? How had the belief in Jesus as not merely the Messiah but an actual divinity grown up so easily in the course of a single generation? Why had Christian teachers laid such an emphasis on *knowledge* as an essential element in the higher life? Above all, how had the mystical strain found entrance into Christianity? For Jesus, as for Paul, the grand aim of life is fellowship with God, but it is a moral fellowship. To be one with God is to live in harmony with God's will, and every act of love, duty, goodness is a participation in the divine nature. With Paul and the Fourth Evangelist this moral oneness with God becomes a oneness of being. Our human nature is different in kind from the nature of God, but through union with Christ a mystical

change is effected whereby a man is born again into a divine life.

These new ideas involved a profound departure from the original Christian teaching, and gave the main direction to the later theology. Whence were they derived? It was taken for granted, until a few years ago, that they were the special contribution of Paul, who boldly took the gospel, as he had received it from the earlier Apostles, and re-cast it with the aid of novel speculations which had arisen in his own mind. But the ideas cannot have been peculiar to Paul, for they appear in writings which appear to have owed little or nothing to Paul's influence. Indeed the whole theory that Paul was a daring innovator who wilfully wrenched the gospel from its authentic form is almost certainly mistaken. It would be far more just to regard him as the grand conservative force in the early church. The changes which are reflected in his thought would have come about anyhow, and were most likely in process before he appeared; but if it had not been for him they might have been carried through in such a manner as almost to obliterate the genuine Christian teaching. This was what actually happened a little later in the Gnostic movement. Paul, with his profoundly Christian spirit, was able to grasp the inner meaning of the gospel, and to preserve it and even to express it more truly while investing it with a new form. Instead of breaking the continuity he was the chief link between the later Christianity and Jesus.

How, then, did those new conceptions come to encroach on the primitive gospel? The answer is undoubtedly to be found when we turn to the world outside of Judaism, and discover the same conceptions widely prevalent in the thought of the time. The gospel had laid hold of teachers, Paul and many others,

who were touched by the Hellenistic culture and fell naturally into its modes of thinking. A great many modern scholars would assign the new ideas more definitely to those strange cults which had invaded Europe from the East, and which had been so potent in awakening the dormant religious feeling of the age. They had all sprung from a primitive nature-worship, and turned invariably on the same central motive. What they offered to men was a redemption from the sorrowful earthly conditions, by means of union with a divinity who had passed through death into a new life. Much in the Christian teaching, especially as set forth by Paul, bears at first sight a startling resemblance to the beliefs that had grown around the worship of Attis and Osiris; but our knowledge is far too slight to bear the weight of hypothesis which has often been reared on it. Too much has been made of coincidences of language, similarity in rites and customs, even of undoubted affinities of thought. It is forgotten that in every period there are watch-words and postulates which are common to all schools of opinion. A few centuries hence the historian will doubtless group together movements of our time which we now think of as utterly antagonistic. Tolstoi and Kipling and William James will stand side by side as men who all taught the same thing with shades of difference, and their mutual borrowings will be confidently traced out. Nor will the resemblances be merely fanciful, for no two thinkers can live in the same age without far more in common than they or their contemporaries can ever guess. We cannot wonder if Christianity, growing up side by side with those other religions, was in many respects akin to them, although it looked on them with abhorrence. A Socialist club of to-day may be virulently opposed to the church, and yet borrows from it at every point in the very act

of denouncing it. People hard of hearing have been known to sit devoutly through a Socialist meeting, under the impression that they were at a church service. So from the hostility with which the early Christians regarded Paganism we cannot infer that they were not influenced, much more than they knew, by its thought and worship. The wonder rather is that in an age when all religions tended to merge together Christianity so faithfully preserved its distinctive character. All through the New Testament, representing as it does so many varieties of teaching, we meet with the same fundamental beliefs, the same unmistakeable type of moral and religious temper. A religion which maintained so tenacious a life of its own can never have been in much danger of being absorbed into any rival cult.

Whatever may have been the influence on Christianity of the so-called mystery-religions the one-sided emphasis which has been laid on it by many modern writers has obscured the real significance of the change that set in after the beginning of the Gentile mission. The new religion was affected not merely by one or another of the contemporary forms of belief but by a force which was all the more subtle and powerful because it did not proceed from any specific movement. That world of the first century in which the currents of Eastern and Western life were so strangely mingled had developed a mood of thought which was peculiarly its own. In the poetry of Virgil, in the philosophy of the later Stoics, no less than in the mystery-religions, we find this mood, in which speculation is shot through with mystical sentiment, in which the chief goal of life is sought in a redemption from the sin and misery inherent in earthly conditions. As it rooted itself in Gentile soil Christianity was impregnated with this

spirit of the age. To explain its later development from some particular Gentile influence is just as misleading as to interpret it wholly from Judaism. We have to allow for all the manifold influences that were at work in that age of ferment, and which drew the new religion into the broad spiritual movement of the time. Before a century was past men had almost forgotten that Christianity had sprung from Judaism. The conceptions of the Greek thinkers, the axioms of Roman law and ethics had become so much a part of it that when earnest Gentiles passed into the church they were hardly conscious of a serious break. Justin and Clement and Tertullian resumed as Christians the train of thought which had occupied them as Pagans, except that they now took their guidance from the Christian beliefs.

To many minds this discovery that our religion has so largely borrowed from alien sources has been more disquieting than any other. In so far as it was touched by what they have always regarded as heathenism, the gospel, they feel, must have suffered an adulteration. Scholars who willingly admit that the New Testament writers were indebted to psalmists and prophets, to Rabbis and apocalyptists, even to a Hellenistic Jew like Philo, have recourse to every ingenious shift to explain away the plainest evidence of a debt to Pagan teachers. This attitude of mind can only be set down to the surviving effect of obsolete theories of inspiration. It is assumed that God conveyed His truth along particular channels, and that anything which came otherwise must necessarily be false or imperfect. But the light that lighteth every man was surely reflected in Greek philosophy and Oriental piety no less than in the Old Testament. A truer estimate of our religion will some day acknowledge that its greatness consists not only in what

it gave from itself but in what it rescued. Holding to its own beliefs it yet attracted and made part of itself all that was true and noble in the spiritual life of the ancient world. Thoughts and aspirations of the highest value which were entangled in the old idolatries and would have perished with them, were given a place in the message of Christ, and were so transmitted to enrich the life of humanity in all times.

That Christianity absorbed many elements from the Pagan culture, and had begun to do so even in New Testament times, can hardly be doubted; but this by no means implies, as one might gather from some recent books, that it drew almost everything from foreign sources. The view is often put forward that Jesus himself gave little more than the initial impulse. That he lived and died, and inaugurated a movement which was continued after his death, is granted, since the tradition on these points is too strong to be overturned. But it is maintained that the simple Christianity which was taught in the church at Jerusalem was only a nucleus, which massed around it, by a series of surprising accidents, the most fruitful elements in the general thought of the time. Greek philosophy, the mysticism of the East, the Stoic morality were gradually attached in this way to the new message, and became part of its substance. Before the world could realise what had happened the call to repentance given forth by Jesus had developed into a complex religion, with a profound theology and elaborate rites. This religion took its name from Christ, but if things had turned out a little differently Attis or Mithra might have been accepted as the object of faith, and the result would have been much the same. The world was ready for a synthesis of all the beliefs which had been accumulating for centuries past, and nothing was needed but some impres-

sive figure around whom they might crystallise. This view of the rise of Christianity has found favour with some eminent writers of our time, but it makes shipwreck on several decisive arguments.

(1) There is first of all the plain fact that it was not one of the rival cults but Christianity which became the centre of the religious movement. This was not due to some accidental advantage, whereby it was able to supplant and finally to absorb its rivals, for every advantage was on *their* side. They were already in the field, and had long overcome all popular prejudice against them. They had the prestige of high antiquity, while Christianity had only come into existence in the time of men still living. They were made imposing to the public eye by gorgeous ceremonial, and men of the loftiest gifts, artists and poets and philosophers, had thrown a glamour around their doctrines. Christianity from the outset was the object of dislike and ridicule and every kind of slander. Its founder had notoriously been condemned as a malefactor. Its adherents were drawn mostly from the lowest ranks. It lay under political suspicion, and all good citizens were convinced that they discharged a public duty in trying to suppress it. Nevertheless, wherever it went it exercised a marvellous power of attraction, and the movements which had held contemptuously aloof were gradually won over to it. From the time when it had once succeeded in putting its message before the world its victory over all competitors was certain. It is mere trifling to contend that this success, obtained in the teeth of every drawback, was due to nothing more than a number of adventitious causes. When the amplest allowance has been made for all of these there is no way of accounting for the victory of Christianity except by its own inherent power. It mastered and assimilated

all the higher life of the time because no other religion could provide a spiritual centre. Its triumph was simply the acknowledgment of this on the part of the world.

(2) The view that our religion was produced by the blending of various elements in first century thought is in some respects true, but it leaves out of account the one all-important fact. One might as well speak of the human body as the resultant of the foods that have gone to nourish it from infancy onward,—forgetting altogether that it is itself a vital organism. Christianity from the first was something more than a passive nucleus, to which thoughts and beliefs from many sides accidentally attached themselves. It reacted on all that it borrowed, and exercised a power of selection. From the miscellaneous life of the time it took what was congenial to its own nature, rejecting by a sure instinct all that was alien. The process by which it grew might be compared to that which takes place in the formation of a language. It might easily be argued that the English we use to-day is nothing but a conglomerate, in which the original language, if there ever was one, has been submerged by the French and Latin and innumerable foreign elements which have continually been added. None the less it has always been in substance the same language. The people who used it have ever been guided by the sense of what was consonant with it, and if incongruous things have found entrance now and then they have never maintained themselves for long. Much has been written on the influence of foreign thought on Paul and the Fourth Evangelist, and it may be their indebtedness was greater than we yet suspect. But far more striking is their hold on what is distinctively Christian. All that they borrow serves only to illuminate and unfold the ideas which they share with the

church before them and with Jesus himself. It is strange indeed that so many great scholars of our time have missed the true import of the fact that Christianity in its early days was so largely a borrowing religion. From this they have inferred that it was not an original force, as we have been wont to conceive it, and owed almost everything to those many contributions from without. But the very fact that it could take in so much is the proof of its inner vitality. It was that energy within itself that enabled it to respond to the world around it, and to derive from all that it touched something for its own enrichment.

(3) This is still more apparent when we consider how it never failed to impress a new value on everything it borrowed. Nowhere is the foreign influence so indubitable as in the doctrine of the sacraments, but in Christian worship the grosser ideas which were associated with the Pagan rites have entirely disappeared. The sacraments have become the symbols of fellowship with Christ, and serve to express the great Christian beliefs and aspirations. This is no less true of the borrowed philosophical conceptions. The Logos doctrine as it appears in the Fourth Gospel was certainly derived through Philo from the Greek thinkers, and it was the adoption of this doctrine which finally sealed the alliance between the Christian teaching and Greek speculation. But the Logos for John has ceased to be a speculative abstraction. While he takes over the idea of a divine principle which from the beginning had been one with God he thinks of it personally, and sees it manifested in Jesus as he had lived and died. It might be shown that wherever else there has been a borrowing there has been at the same time a transformation. The maxims of Stoic morality are adopted by the Christian teachers, but they are made to rest on those new esti-

mates of man's duty which had been set forth by Jesus. The mystical piety of the cults is grafted on the demand for faith in Christ in such a manner that the two can hardly be distinguished. When the foreign elements have been thus baptised into the new religion they can no longer be considered as in any real sense foreign.

(4) That Christianity maintained its independence is clear from that variety in the New Testament teaching which has already been noted. Some of the writings show hardly a trace of the Hellenistic leaven, and bear witness to a persistence of the primitive ideas amidst alien surroundings. In the books where the foreign influence is undoubtedly at work it manifests itself under quite different forms. Paul gives a central place to the doctrine of union with Christ in his death and resurrection, which is passed over by the other writers. The Fourth Evangelist bases his Gospel on the conception of the Logos, of which Paul takes practically no account. The author of Hebrews rejects altogether the mystical side of Gentile thought, and avails himself only of its Platonic idealism. James has no concern with it except in its bearing on practical ethics. In view of this wide divergence of interest it is futile to think of Christianity as identified with any one phase of the Hellenistic movement. It was a movement by itself, open at every point to suggestions from without, but in no wise committed to them. "He who is spiritual," says Paul, "judges all things, but he himself is judged of no man". This attitude of freedom which is enjoined on the individual Christian is nowhere better exemplified than in the early history of the religion as a whole. It stands over against all the outside forces, pressing them continually into its service, but never at the sacrifice of its own distinctive message.

The theory, therefore, that Christianity was assimi-

lated, at an early stage, to the surrounding Paganism cannot stand for a moment. From the beginning it had so marked an identity of its own that it resisted all efforts to merge it in other movements of the time, and finally emerged victorious. Nevertheless there can be little doubt that while it was still in process of moulding it was influenced on many sides from without, and that some of the doctrines which have always been regarded as native to it were in their origin Pagan. This conclusion alone has been fatal to the traditional estimate of the New Testament. It has been cherished as the book in which the authentic Christian teachings were set down before they had suffered the least taint of corruption, and again and again, from the Arian controversy onwards, the church has appealed to it as the one sure touch-stone. Here at least was the genuine gospel; here was the mind of the primitive Apostles, who had received their message directly from the Lord. Yet it is just this view of the New Testament which is now called in question. We are learning to suspect that within a few years of Jesus' death the gospel underwent an admixture from the side of that very Paganism which it condemned. No wonder that the discovery has seemed to many to have destroyed the value of the New Testament; but it may yet prove, when we have had further time to reflect on it, to have brought a great gain. The old belief that our religion was sullied in so far as it endured any contact with alien thought was, after all, a false and arbitrary one, a survival of the monastic sentiment that the church and the world must be kept utterly separate. The experience of the centuries has gone for little unless we can now conceive of the divine forces as co-operating with the ordinary life of man. Christianity did not grow up in a cloister. It was thrown from the outset into the full current of the

world, and was open to all the varied influences around it. It freely absorbed into itself everything that might enrich it and enable it to appeal more directly to the mind of the time.

Our task to-day is to bring the gospel back into this relation to the actual world. In our modern science and philosophy, in our conceptions of society and the state and the conduct of life there is much that cannot be fitted into the conventional creeds. Can we so expand our religion that it will give room to all the new wealth of thought and experience and at the same time become more truly itself? The New Testament is the record of how a similar task was accomplished in the first century. Those early teachers, carrying their message into the great Roman world, were not afraid to cast it in new forms and to blend it with many elements from that alien culture which they were seeking to regenerate. They have shown us how in our time we may bring our faith into harmony with the larger life, and yet preserve it as the old commandment which we had from the beginning.

CHAPTER IV

The New Testament in the Modern World

THE motive of the New Testament critic, like that of the investigator in other fields of knowledge, is simply to discover the facts. He is sometimes represented as a subtle adversary of the Christian beliefs, sometimes as an advocate who seeks to provide them with a new line of defence, but both views are unjust. The critical enquiry in itself has nothing to do with the religious issue, on one side or the other. None the less it is impossible to survey its results without some effort to calculate their bearing on our religion. Especially in these days, when the church is facing extraordinary difficulties, we cannot but ask ourselves whether its work will be helped or hindered by the light which has been thrown on the New Testament.

It cannot be denied that in all the Christian countries there has been a marked decline of the religious spirit during the last fifty years, and according to some observers this is the beginning of a permanent change. Religion, they hold, is merely a phase through which the race has had to pass in its onward march, and the point has now been reached when it is preparing to leave this phase behind it. But it may safely be affirmed that there can be no final break with religion, for the simple reason that it is a necessary part of man's nature, like the love of home, or the sense of beauty, or the impulse towards knowledge. So long as men are conscious of an infinite world around them, so long as they aspire to

something higher than they can ever attain to, they will be religious. All will and thought and emotion must needs find their issue, sooner or later, in some kind of religion. Nor is it a mere presumption to believe that religion, whatever may be its future development, will follow the direction of Christianity. The specific Christian doctrines may disappear, or suffer such a change that we shall hardly know them, but the conceptions which lie at the heart of the gospel are in their nature ultimate. The soul of every man has an infinite value; love, goodness, truth are the greatest things in the world; men are to find their well-being in service to one another;—these are the Christian beliefs, and while they may be capable of higher interpretations than we can yet foresee they are self-evidently the final beliefs. No advance of knowledge, no grander civilisation is conceivable which will carry us beyond them. The custom has grown up, and for scientific purposes it is convenient and necessary, of classifying Christianity along with the other great historical religions. This willingness to regard it as only one religion in a group is supposed to mark the tolerance which distinguishes the modern from the mediaeval mind. But the truth is that Christianity is the only religion. It expresses in their purity, and with a clear consciousness of their value and meaning, those elements in human thought which can properly be called religious. Nothing is more significant than the endeavour of every rival faith at the present day to bring itself into line with the Christian teaching. Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Mohammedanism are all being presented in new forms, often impressive and beautiful, and disclosing, we cannot doubt, the higher possibilities of their worship. But it is certain that these possibilities would have remained hidden if it had not been for Christianity. It has

served as the touch-stone whereby the purer elements in all other religions can be separated from the base metal. Earnest men who cannot abandon their ancestral faith are yet aware that it has religious value, and that they can sincerely hold to it, only in so far as it answers to the Christian ideals.

It cannot be supposed, then, that the world will ever move away from religion, or from Christianity, which is religion in its highest and purest form. Yet it is only too evident that in our time religious sanctions have lost their weight, religious ideas and observances are counting for less than ever before in the lives of ordinary men. How must we explain this eclipse of religion, which may be only temporary but is none the less real and serious?

(1) It is partly due to that revolt from old conceptions of authority, to which reference has been made already. As we watch the operation of the new liberty in all the various fields, we are often tempted to ask ourselves whether the gain has balanced the loss. By submitting to an outward rule, however imperfect, men probably secured more of the essential good of life than under the new conditions. As citizens obeying an established order they were able to live peaceably, and to enjoy their homes and their friendships, and the things that made for culture and well-being. As religious men they found ample support for the higher life in the inherited beliefs. The pious Catholic who rested his faith on an infallible church had access to the inner secret of the gospel; no one can doubt it who is acquainted with the "Imitation" and the mediaeval hymns. The pious Protestant who believed in the Bible as the literal word of God obtained the strength and the consolation which are the best fruits of religion. In these days of superior knowledge we often look back wist-

fully on that simpler faith and would fain return to it, but it is well to recognise frankly that such a return is impossible. For good or evil men have examined the old political systems and the ancient creeds, and have found them baseless. They have discovered that the Bible is not the ultimate truth. You can rest on an authority and make it serve your higher welfare only so long as you honestly believe in it. As soon as you have cause to suspect it your attempts to build on it are mere pretence, and you have no right to make them. An authority of some kind is necessary if the world is not to go to pieces, but it must be one that will command our inner obedience, and as yet we are seeking for it in vain.

(2) Again, the modern spirit rebels against the one-sidedness of that ideal of life which has been offered to it in the name of Christianity. In the days of the Renascence, when the ancient world with its art and literature and magnificent achievement was suddenly revealed, it seemed like the opening of prison doors. For a thousand years life had been rigidly circumscribed by the teaching of the church; a few things had been held up so persistently for admiration that men had almost forgotten the existence of any others. Now they became aware of the vast fields of experience, the joy and knowledge and beauty from which they had been shut out, and the consequence of the discovery was a resentment against Christianity, which led for a time to something like a reversion to Paganism. This feeling of resentment never wholly died out, and with the broadening of all our horizons in the last century it has declared itself more strongly than ever. Most men who have grown lukewarm or hostile to Christianity would probably in their different ways justify their attitude on the ground of this belief that it unduly narrows their

life. It puts the stamp of approval on only one type of character; it bars out all speculation that will not square with a given creed; it sets its face against many things that belong to life, and ought therefore to have their place in its richness and completeness. Whether it is reasonable or not we have to reckon with this suspicion that the effect of Christianity is to rob us of some part of our birthright. Our religion has to be conceived in some more comprehensive way, it has to allow more fully for the diversity of life and admit many elements which it has insisted on excluding, before it will recover the tribute of the modern world.

(3) Behind all definite causes for the impatience with Christianity there is the sense that it belongs to the past and is therefore outworn. Christian apologists have justly laid stress on its wonderful record of service. It re-built a new world after the old one had fallen; moulded the great modern nations; created all the institutions which have made for liberty and progress; inspired and sustained a multitude of noble lives. All this has been the work of Christianity, and do we need further evidence of its indestructible value? But the very fact that it *has* achieved such great things may be a proof that its usefulness is now over. The religions of Egypt, Greece, Rome produced lofty civilisations, but who would think of reviving them? They accomplished their work so well because they answered the needs of society at a given stage of its progress, and when that stage was past were nothing but a burden. May it not be the same with Christianity? To be sure it has preserved its vitality for so long a period that it may seem to be independent of changing conditions, but the reason may simply be that life has followed a uniform course through this whole period. Sometimes it comes over us with a shock of surprise that all the

things which are most characteristic of the world we live in are only of yesterday. Almost within the memory of men still alive the political systems, the methods of labour and travelling, the current conceptions of man's place in the universe were much the same as when Christianity began its mission. For all these centuries it was in full harmony with the world's needs, but in our time there has been a revolution, such as was never known before. Science has compelled us to look out on nature with different eyes. Machinery has altered all the conditions of living. The awakening of the masses has brought about the overthrow of the old social order. It is the consciousness of this profound change, more than anything else, which has caused the present drift from Christianity. Blame has sometimes been laid on the apathy of churches, but it may fairly be claimed that in no previous age has the church been so anxious to fulfil its obligations. Blame has been laid on what is vaguely called the materialism of the time, but this is equally beside the mark. To bring material things into the service of man is one of the noblest of duties, and there is no reason why an age devoted to it should grow less religious. The spiritual decline is rather to be explained from this,—that the progress in life as a whole has outrun the religious progress. For the old needs the inherited faith was sufficient, but all at once came the enormous access of power, freedom, opportunity. We are growing conscious in these days that the old faith cannot bear the strain, and on all sides there is a growing cleavage between life and religion.

These appear to be the chief reasons of a change which has long been threatening, and has now to be confronted. Judging by many signs it might almost seem as if the days of our religion were numbered. It is

significant, however, that in the mind of nearly everyone there is an increasing sense of regret and loss. Not so long ago the escape from religion was hailed as a glorious emancipation. It was the fashion to picture the church as the grand obstacle to progress, the chief buttress of unjust privilege, the secular enemy of culture and enlightenment. Blustering attacks on it never missed their applause. But this animosity now survives only among the very ignorant. Thoughtful men, even when they are most strongly opposed to Christianity, are conscious of all that it has meant to the world, and look with dismay to the time when it will have vanished.

This new feeling has become far more acute and more prevalent in the last few years. Even before the war it was increasingly evident that somewhere in our modern life there was a deep-seated flaw. Superficial observers had eyes only for the manifold signs of prosperity, and assured us confidently that we had now struck the high-road to the millennium; but those who could see further never shared this optimism. Then came the great collapse, and everybody would now confess that whatever were its definite causes it was the outcome of a far more radical trouble. Something had been missing in our life, and for the want of it all the things that ought to have made for welfare became mischievous. It seemed to the reformers of last century that the world would be saved by scientific progress, unity of national life, growth of material resources. These things were achieved in far larger measure than they dared to hope, and the result has been the most fearful calamity that has ever happened on earth. Political unity set the nations in fierce rivalry with one another. The splendid advances in science made the arts of destruction more terrible. Accumulation of

wealth, instead of easing the struggle for existence, has created a huger mass of poverty. Why is it that all the blessings men prayed for have thus been changed, as in some old Pagan story, into a curse? The fault cannot be in the things themselves, for these are undoubtedly the necessary means to a larger human life, and we cannot have too much of them. Yet they have proved fruitless, and all who have pondered the riddle have arrived at the same answer, though they may state it in different terms. That which was wanting in our modern civilisation was the religious motive. Our life, though it had grown ampler and richer, had lost the instinct of direction,—had ceased to relate itself to those higher laws on which its safety and well-being must ultimately depend. Everything was lavishly provided for the voyage, but the compass had broken down.

All who are seriously grappling with the problems of this time are alive to the great defect, and are pointing to various means by which it may be remedied. Some think it possible that one enthusiasm or another may prove to be an adequate substitute for religion. A few years ago the favourite substitute was patriotism; and in Germany, more especially, a deliberate effort was made to exalt the State into a supreme ideal, which should satisfy that side of man's nature which had hitherto turned to religion. For Germany and the world this cult of the State has produced such fruits that it is not likely to be perpetuated. It is now customary in some quarters to speak of a religion of democracy or labour or social justice, but this is merely an abuse of language. A social enthusiasm may spring from a religious motive, but cannot of itself supply one. It is but too evident, from the experiments of our day, that the new economic cults have their outcome in cupidity and class-hatred, and have nothing whatever to do with

the higher life. This, indeed, is the fallacy of all attempts to find a substitute for religion,—that without religion all the other causes that inspire us become flat and meaningless. Nothing is left of devotion to one's country or one's fellow-men but some larger and more dangerous kind of self-assertion. Apart from religion there can be no cleansing purpose, no quickening power.

Instead of a substitute, therefore, many are hoping for a new religion, which will by and bye supersede the old one. There is certainly no existing faith which any sane man would dream of enthroning in the place of Christianity, nor is there any movement which seems to have in it even the germs of a new religion. But this might also have been said at the beginning of the Christian era, and why may we not surmise that some great personality will again appear, some new breath of the Spirit will touch the exhausted world? It may well be doubted, however, whether a new religion is either possible or necessary. If it comes it can only take the form of a re-affirmation of the principles already contained in Christianity, and to that extent would not be new. Hitherto all the efforts to create a new religion have consisted in nothing else than in lifting some particular idea out of its Christian setting, and putting it in a different and much inferior one. As we contemplate these modern cults we are reminded of the structures which arose in the Middle Ages out of the ruins of the Roman palaces and temples. Glorious arches gave entrance to a row of stables; broken shafts of columns were embedded in rude masonry, which looked all the meaner by the contrast. So with the new creeds, ethical and mystical and humanitarian. They are built out of a jumble of Christian fragments, which cannot be understood till they are put back into their true context.

No new religion, or substitute for a religion is needed, for what the world is seeking is simply a return to Christianity. It has indeed moved away from many of the traditional beliefs, but there has never been an age which was more in sympathy with the essential gospel. This is the tragedy of that drift from religion which we see around us,—that it has happened in an age which of all others might have responded to Christ. He has come to his own and they receive him not.

For one thing it is in this age that the great Christian idea of human brotherhood has shown signs of realising itself. It has been furthered, no doubt, by many forces which are quite apart from religion,—by commercial intercourse, by the mingling of diverse races in the new countries, by political levelling, even by the disillusionment of war. But along these paths men have been feeling their way towards one of the central truths of the gospel. They have learned to set up as the chief goal of practical statesmanship what the church has always cherished as a far-off ideal. And when due account has been taken of all the co-operating causes the chief force in the creation of this sense of brotherhood has been nothing else than the leaven of Christianity, working silently for these two thousand years.

Again, the feeling has taken possession of this age, more than of any before it, that the true aims of life are spiritual. Here also we must reckon with many tributary causes, some of them negative. By the very concentration on the material side of life we have grown aware of its insufficiency. Wealth and invention have advanced further than men ever dreamed of, only to impress on us that not one of our real wants has been satisfied. But at the same time there has been a positive strengthening of the spiritual instincts. No time has

ever been when men were swayed so much by ideal motives, or were so convinced that the intangible things are alone worth striving for. It is this, indeed, that makes the movements of our age so incalculable, and in many ways so dangerous. If the late war had been fought, like former ones, merely for new wealth or territory, it would never have lasted through those four terrible years. If the struggle now in process had no other end in view than political re-adjustments and economic advantages it could soon be settled by some compromise. But the real motives that are at work, however we may judge them, are spiritual in their nature, and no one can fore-tell whither they will ultimately drive.

Once more, there are many evidences that men are wakening again to a sense of the mystery that surrounds our life. A generation ago it was commonly expected that all secrets were presently to be laid bare. This illusion was rarely shared by men of science themselves, whose knowledge of their limitations has been in striking contrast to the arrogance of theologians. But the progress of science undoubtedly encouraged the belief among the mass of unreflecting people that the riddle of the universe had at last been nearly solved. Life, it was assumed, was no longer inexplicable. All things in heaven and earth were regarded as parts of a vast mechanism, which baffled us as yet only because it was so complicated. This mode of thinking is already out of date, and on all sides we can note a revulsion from the mechanical theory of the world. Philosophy is working back to something like the old idealistic positions; science itself is making room for unknowable factors in its analysis of life and matter; ordinary men and women are speculating, often in a very crude and dubious fashion, about the invisible world. This revival of the feeling of mystery is one of the most re-

markable signs of our times, and out of this feeling religion has always been born.

Besides all this, in spite of the distaste for Christian dogma there is a growing recognition of the truth and value of Christian morality. It was one of the gravest symptoms of the period before the war that the ethical standards of Christianity were openly challenged. There were brilliant writers in every country who demanded a new moral code, based frankly on principles of egoism. The belief was steadily making its way among the mass of the people that the old restrictions were burdensome and artificial, and ought now to be shaken off by enlightened men. The war with its attendant horrors was largely an outgrowth of this revived Paganism, and by exposing it may yet be found to have saved our civilisation. We have been recalled, by a tremendous shock, to moral realities. It has become evident to all men that the new theories, often set forth so plausibly, have their issues in death, and that the Christian standards are valid for our complex modern world just as much as for the simpler conditions of the past. The recognition of this is the driving force behind all the social movement of the present day. Men have come to realise, as never before, that the principles laid down in the Sermon on the Mount are not the dreams of a religious visionary, but the solid foundations on which alone a human society can permanently rest.

So by many paths we have gradually been returning to a mood which is in sympathy with the Christian message. A new consciousness has sprung up that man is a spiritual being, that the ends of his life must be spiritual, that his progress is bound up with his accepting the Christian ideas of brotherhood and the supremacy of the moral law. In not a few respects the

conditions of the time are not dissimilar to those of the first century. We have again a highly developed society in which many diverse elements are being fused together, and which is being threatened with exhaustion. We have the same discontent with the present, the same vague stirrings of a new spiritual life. At that time Christianity came forward with its message, and found a mood that was able to respond to it. It gave unity and direction to the longings for deliverance. It created a spring of energy which enabled the wearied world to set out again on a more strenuous march. May not the miracle be repeated? No new religion is likely to offer itself, and none is needed. There are still forces in Christianity more than sufficient; how can they be made effectual for the needs of our age?

The question is one which cannot be answered, for nothing is so incalculable as the impulse which leads to religious revival. In these days, when everything is reduced to system, the call arises from time to time for organised effort in the sphere of religion. But there are some things, and it is a comfort to think of it, which cannot be done by the most skilful organisation. The life of the spirit answers to its own laws, which cannot be discovered, and which certainly are not those of the efficient business or work-shop. The springs of the new life must issue spontaneously, but meanwhile a channel can be prepared for them, and the criticism of the New Testament is one of the chief agencies which have been working to this end. The idea still lingers in some pious circles that it has been merely destructive, and there are no doubt many things in the traditional faith which it *has* destroyed. But for this very reason it has made possible a new presentation of Christianity, such as will carry a real conviction to the modern mind.

For one thing, it is no small matter that we can now feel reasonably certain of what the New Testament is, and what it is meant to teach us. In old days enquiry was forbidden. The book was simply thrust upon Christian men, and a merit was made of their accepting everything contained in it without doubt or question. Such a demand was always felt to be unjust, and in this age, when everything else is subjected to the freest enquiry, it was becoming more and more dangerous. Enemies declared that the book shunned examination because it could not bear it; and even the devout believer could not but feel that he was staking his whole faith on unproved assertions. The church has done itself irreparable harm by refusing to submit its title-deeds to any test. It reasoned that discussion would foster a habit of doubt, and that absolute confidence was necessary on the fundamental matters of religion. But the confidence that is secured by merely shutting your ears to evidence is easily shaken. To demand it in our days from any intelligent man is flatly impossible. Criticism, whatever else it has done, has enabled us to get behind legends and conjectures and lay hold of facts. The facts may seem poorer than the imaginations, but at any rate they *are* facts. We know at last what our religion is based on; faith has found a real starting-point.

But again, the effort to reach the facts has not impoverished the New Testament, or the religion to which it witnesses. To be sure we are now obliged to recognise the human limitations of the book. We can see that doctrines which were once supposed to embody the absolute truth were mixed up with much that was transient and mistaken. But all enquiry has served to deepen our reverence for the book as an expression of religion. We have been made to realise that the

writers were seeking to define, in terms however inadequate, things which they intensely felt, and which, in their innermost meaning, must stand forever. Because it thus takes us so close to the realities of religion the New Testament has more to give us than if it was an infallible guide to doctrine. We enter by means of it into communion with great seekers after God. Our very sense that they could only half express themselves arouses us to a personal effort of faith and sympathy, so that we may reach through the letter to the living conviction that was in their minds. The modern enquiry has indeed made us more than ever doubtful of the traditional forms of Christianity, from which, in any case, the age had broken away. But it has brought us a far clearer insight into their inner significance. We can feel again, as men felt in the primitive age, that what Christ gave was not a creed or a system but a regenerating spirit.

The New Testament, moreover, has gained in value since we have learned to read it in its relation to history. The older theology sought to detach it as far as possible from the time to which it belonged, with the object of enhancing its authority. It was assumed that the Apostles were set free, by some divine privilege, from the restrictions of their age. They were able to state the truths revealed to them in terms that would be always valid. They enjoyed a vision that extended to the farthest future, so that the rules which they laid down for their own time would serve for the permanent guidance of the church. But this attempt to lift the New Testament out of the frame-work of history only weakened and obscured its message. The Christianity for which it stands is not an abstract ideal, but an ideal entering into time, and bringing its power to bear on the obstinate material of work-a-day life. We see it

taking hold of that Pagan world of the first century, transforming a society that was on the point of decay, adjusting itself to the ideas and conditions of the time in order to work more effectually. Our religion as we thus study it in action becomes more of a reality. In the light of that early record we can set it in relation to the problems and difficulties which confront us to-day. Historians tell us that the great religious movement in the age of St. Bernard and St. Francis was due in part to the acquaintance with the Holy Land which had resulted from the Crusades. The places associated with the life of Jesus had hitherto been nothing but strange names, suggesting theological ideas. Now they were suddenly discovered to be towns and villages, just as real as those of France or Italy. The ancient story was made living again. Men could feel that it had actually happened, that it belonged to their own world, that it had a significance for them still. There are many signs that something like the same result is following from the historical study of the New Testament. It seemed at first an irreverence to think of Jesus as a man of his time, and to examine his gospel in its connection with first century thought. But already it is apparent that the new attitude to the book has put life into its message. We can recognise that Paul and his fellow-Apostles, even when their language appears most abstract, are speaking out of a deeply felt experience, and with a view to actual circumstances; nor is it difficult to see how these circumstances are repeating themselves, under various disguises, in the world of to-day. Above all, the figure of Jesus himself stands out all the more grandly as the mists of theological speculation are blown away from him, and we come to discern him as he really sojourned on earth. It is not too much to say that by recovering for us the historical life of Jesus

criticism has brought Christianity back to the true sources of its power. The creeds, whatever may have been their value formerly, have broken down, but Jesus as we know him in his life, and all the more as the life is freed from accretions of legend, still commands the world's reverence and devotion. The theology of the future, it is not rash to prophesy, will start from the interpretation of Jesus as a man in history.

Finally, the modern enquiry has made it possible for us to think of Christianity as a living revelation. According to the old view the mind of the Spirit was communicated once for all in the New Testament, so that henceforth the church had no other duty than to guard the deposit of truth. This assumption, more than anything else, has weighed like a burden on Christianity. Ever and again great enterprises for human welfare have been arrested, because the New Testament said nothing of them, or seemed to discountenance them. Advances in knowledge have been condemned because they lay beyond the horizon of New Testament thought. It is one of the ironies of history that the names of the great pioneers and liberators have always been used, in a later age, as watch-words of reaction; and this perversion has never been so manifest as in the case of the New Testament. It owed its very existence to an impulse of progress. As they encountered ever new conditions the missionaries sought to bring their gospel into harmony with them. The aid of Greek speculation was called in to interpret the work of Jesus to the Gentiles; the demands he had laid down were applied in new directions to meet the difficulties which could not present themselves in Galilee or Jerusalem. No forward movement has ever been so bold and rapid as that which transformed a little Jewish sect into the church of a great empire, made up of diverse races

which had been nurtured in heathenism. It is surely illogical to acclaim the New Testament writers as the men who understood Christianity best, and in the same breath to denounce the very principles they worked on. They refused to identify the gospel with any set mode of declaring it. They saw that it could preserve itself only by taking in new elements, and throwing itself continually into fresh moulds. May we not hope that one result of the convulsions through which we are now passing will be to recover for Christianity that freedom of movement which it possessed in the early days? It has been so long associated with a given type of thought, a given structure of society that it has become frost-bound. For most people it is an integral part of the old order, and they are afraid of the changes which will involve its destruction. But the breaking up of the old order has thrown it back on its inward power of self-renewal. The changes which may seem for the moment to have wrecked it will prove in the end to have meant its liberation.

Life is always in movement, and the message which has inspired one generation will be meaningless in the next. None the less, in its deeper issues life is always the same; no truth which has once been able to uplift and strengthen it will ever be out of date. The gospel makes its appeal to what is central and permanent in man's nature, but it loses half its power unless it can adjust itself continually to the process of change. It has been the error of the church in the past that it has been mindful only of one side of its twofold task. Rightly insisting that its message has an eternal value it has striven to preserve it in the same rigid forms, and the world's life has now outgrown them. The modern enquiry has rendered the church a vital service by impressing on it that the faith which cramps itself

within a fixed tradition is not the faith of the New Testament. Christianity, as we know it from the earliest records, kept pace with the movement of life. It was at once the truth proclaimed by Jesus and the truth which unfolded itself through the operation of his living Spirit. More than once in the course of its history our religion has been saved by a return to the New Testament, and this, we may dare to anticipate, will happen again. The ancient book, which seemed to bind us to an outworn past, has become our charter of liberty. We are loyal to it most when we answer its call to go forward, and to re-fashion its teaching by the larger light of this new time.

Date Due