

## CHRISTIANITY AND ENLIGHTENMENT

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(Address of President William Louis Poteat to the North Carolina Baptist State Convention, Winston-Salem, December 13, 1922, published by request of the Convention.)

Permit me to read to you a little passage out of a little book. I love the little book and accept all it says. It has been the light and joy of my life. I commend it to you. It is our final authority for faith and practice. It is our most precious possession. If you hear of anybody who flouts its authority and threatens to destroy it and to dislodge it from the minds and hearts of men, blow your trumpet, turn the bell of it Wake Forest way, and our little company, little but loyal, will be at your side on the dot.

The little passage of the little book which I should like you to hold in mind on this particular occasion is John 16:12-15, 33:18:1:

"I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit, when he the Spirit of truth is come, he shall guide you into all the truth; for he shall not speak from himself (that is, of his own accord); but what things soever he shall hear, these shall he speak; and he shall declare unto you the things that are to come. He shall glorify me; for he shall take of mine and shall declare it unto you. All things whatsoever the Father hath are mine. . . . These things have I spoken unto you, that in me ye may have peace. In the world ye have tribulation; but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world. . . . When Jesus had spoken these words, he went forth with his disciples over the brook Kidron, where was a garden."

In these words, uttered on the eve of the crucifixion, there are two great statements—one, that the revelation of Christ, according to His own declaration, is an expanding revelation, ministered by the Spirit of truth; the other, that Christ is the source, theme, and aim of all truth.

At a critical point of one of Ibsen's dramas, *Solness*, the master builder, jealous of the superior gifts of a young rival, exclaims, "The younger generation will one day come and thunder at my door. They will break in upon me." When it is suggested that he ought to go out and open the door to the younger generation in friendly welcome, he replies, "No, no, no. The younger generation—it means retribution, you see. It comes as if under a new banner, heralding a new turn of fortune." What the old architect feared is precisely the hope of the world—the young thundering in on the old, the young perpetually taking the place of the old. This is the primary fact of human life. The opportunity of change is there, the hope of a better day. It substitutes vigor for decline, teachableness for unteachableness, the spirit of adventure for conformity, initiative for the love of comfort, which prefers that things remain as they are. This succession of the generations is like a relay race, in which the exhausted runner passes the banner to a fresh runner—same banner, new legs.

Now, education is grooming the runner for the race. It is fitting the young to start where the old stop. It is giving the new members of society what the old ones have, all that the old ones have, all that is available. Except for the boundaries of achievement set in heredity, each new generation starts life afresh, and presents so much plastic material for the home, the school, the

church, and the manifold play of circumstance to mould to noble or ignoble ends. And so it comes to pass that mankind is forever in the making—in the young.

### History

A brief word of history. Harvard, Yale, Brown, Princeton, King's College, now Columbia, were avowedly established to prepare young men for the life to come, and, in the words of the Massachusetts Legislature, "to fight the chief project of the old deluder, Satan, to keep them from the knowledge of the Scriptures." This was the aim of educational establishments before the Revolution. But after the Revolution, mainly through the influence of Thomas Jefferson, citizenship, a serious and virtuous citizenship indeed, supplanted religion as the aim of higher education. For example, in William and Mary, Jefferson substituted for the chair of divinity the chair of law and police. From 1827 onward there seems to have been no recognized aim beyond intellectual culture, "the discipline and furniture of the mind" and the development of method and technique. This loss of purpose in education was a reflection of the prevailing disagreement of thoughtful men in other fields about the permanent values in life. We are now getting a new perspective and standard of moral and spiritual values. Accordingly, education is recovering somewhat of its old moral purpose and swinging back to its obligation to fit the young for service in realizing the higher interests and ideals of the race. Various expedients to renew in secular education the religious motive and standard have been resorted to. Denominational colleges, arising about 1830 and onward, have been all along true to the high Christian aim.

If I am asked for a definition of Christian education, I reply, Christian education is Christianity operating in the field of enlightenment.

The Bible is the final authority for faith and practice; hence, Christian education.

Christianity arose in the best culture of its time and, when not misrepresented, has been the nourishing mother of the best culture ever since; hence, Christian education.

Christianity is the only hope for the redemption of the moving world and must keep pace with its task; hence, Christian education.

Christianity organizes itself in denominations for its task; hence, denominational education.

### **The Crisis**

Life is a complex of personal relationships, and the problem which comprehends all other human problems is the problem of living together in harmony and mutual helpfulness. Here are old and young, rich and poor, vigorous and feeble, cultured and ignorant, native and alien, male and female, white and black, good and bad. There are not wanting indications that the problem has lately become acute. There are more people than ever before, they move about faster, and bump into one another oftener. After the subordination of racial, national, class, and personal interests in the grand merger of the World War, do we not see the revival of the old antagonisms? Does not every morning's paper bear depressing testimony to the drawing apart of England and France, upon whose accord the peace of Europe depends? After the comradeship of heroism in the trenches of Flanders, is it going to be possible again to define a true Englishman, in the words of Lord Nelson, as one who hates a Frenchman

like the devil? And there are still a hundred lynchings a year. Nine-tenths of them occur in the South, and in four-fifths of them the victims are negroes. What of labor and capital? Curiously enough "Labor" has a way of not laboring, and that without overmuch concern about consequences. And capital—has there been no talk of breaking the back of labor unionism? The freedom of the sexes allowed in war times, has it settled back into the discreet intercourse of the earlier period, or lapsed into a license which portends social tragedy? And the fighting spirit which we took such pains to develop in our young men for the winning of the war holds over in peace times and adds to our pre-war pre-eminence in crime a record of violence which is full of alarm. A single city of our country has more homicides a year than the whole of England and Wales. In short, we are witnessing a sort of frenzy of insubordination and crime. The unity of civilization itself is menaced by the forces of disunion and anarchy. Our civilization, says Mr. Wells, is tumbling down, tumbling down fast.

### **Treatment**

In reading the symptoms of our social malady there is general agreement. There is wide disagreement in the treatment proposed. One remedy is socialism, or the communal ownership of land and capital and the instruments and machinery of production. But socialism makes two capital blunders. In the first place, it proceeds on the assumption that society is a mechanism, and if it is found not to function properly, all that is needed is to shake the bundle of injustices and inequalities to pieces, and then put it together right by act of Legislature, brutally to rights, if

necessary. On the contrary, we know that society is an organism, and its features and activities are the result of a vital growth. Shaking it to pieces means its death. A more serious blunder of socialism is this, it ignores the root of moral evil out of which all social wrongs spring. We conclude that there is no hope in socialism.

Prussianism, or the rule of might, has been offered as a method to settle antagonistic interests. The strong ought to rule the weak, and war is the final test of strength. If persons, classes, or nations disagree, let them fight it out, and let the strong hold by right what they win by might. And we shall have peace—the peace of slavery! But I seem to recall that Prussianism received something of a shock in November on the eleventh day in the year nineteen eighteen!

Many agree with H. G. Wells, who finds our social salvation and security in education. Plain truth, he says in "The Salvaging of Civilization," will clear up all our difficulties. The world educated up to a pitch of understanding and co-operation not reached heretofore—that is the key to all social disorders. In other words, modern life is a race between education and catastrophe. And this saving education is within our power, that is, if we have the purpose, given the will. Exactly! But who can guarantee the will? To know what is right is one thing; to do what is right is quite another thing. And when Bertrand Russell declares that the scientific temper is capable of regenerating mankind, we recognize in the proposal the same fatal absence of the moral dynamic. No, no. None of these. It is

## Anarchy or Christ

Christ is the physician of souls, therefore of society. I make no apology to any group of gentlemen anywhere, anywhen, for finding in Christ the hope of social redemption and the law of social progress. Did He not say in the days of His flesh, "My words shall not pass away?" I remind you of the judgment of the distinguished biologist and psychologist of England who declared that no word uttered by Jesus had been discounted by all the progress of knowledge since His day. His teaching has the quality of perpetual contemporaneousness. We shall never get beyond Him, for our progress is conditioned upon our following Him. He inaugurated the greatest social movement of all time, the Kingdom of God. Wherever He appears on the plain of history He speaks the word of emancipation. That which distinguishes Western civilization is directly traceable to "that fund of altruism with which He equipped it in its cradle." The public conscience which forced the warring nations to shift to other shoulders the crime and havoc of the World War—England said "It was not I, it was Germany." And Germany insisted it was not she, but England and France. And Russia said, "Not I." And France, "I had to protect myself against destruction. No, I didn't bring it on"—here was something new in the field of statesmanship. Hitherto war was the legitimate pastime of nations. It required no justification. Who set up this high moral standard to which all enlightened nations at length appealed? Who but Christ? Moreover, the chief items in the inventory of our social progress are His gifts to mankind.

### The Method of Christ

The French priest, Lammenais, was criticized at Rome for erroneous political opinions, but he laid his finger on the secret of Jesus when he said, "All that Christ asked of mankind wherewith to save them was a cross whereon to die." Yes, Brother Ayers, the cross is the central peak of revelation.\* The cross is the central fact toward which all previous history converges, from which all subsequent history diverges with a crimson tinge forever. Redemption is there, or it is nowhere, individual redemption and social redemption. Christ crucified works in the individual life a revolution so universal and so radical that there is no describing it save in His own immortal figure, the new birth. When the name of our dear brother, F. M. Jordan, was called this morning, you cannot guess what I thought about at once. I recalled a revival meeting which he held in Wake Forest College away back in the seventies, and but for the renovation of the building I could point you out the pew on the back of which I wept my heart out as I said to my Lord that the experience which I had at the age of twelve might have been genuine or not, one thing was certain now, that He was mine and I was His forever. I do not know what occurred in the deeps of my nature then. I have no psychology of conversion. I do not have to understand it in order to be assured of its reality. And you do not know what occurred in the deeps of your nature when you had the same happy experience; and you do not have to understand it. I only know that when I yielded my heart to Him my

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\*In allusion to the Convention sermon.



surrender was my victory; this slavery of love these intervening years has been my emancipation.

And he will transform society by transforming its constituent units. What we require is not a new system of government, a new scheme for the distribution of wealth, a new social organization. What we require is new people. And I know of no way to make new people except Christ's way. I have read in Paul about new creatures in Christ Jesus. Out of the glory of the Cross, tempered to our weak apprehension by the compassion which sought us beyond the gates of death, He shouts to us through the brightening centuries, "Follow me." He came to the leadership of the Kingdom by the way of the Cross. That way lies our path. In other words, the law of His life is the law of our life, the law of love and renunciation.

### **Christianity and Enlightenment**

Our deepest need is to be good; after that, to be intelligent. There is no way to be good but Christ's way. We are made for God and find no rest until we rest in Him, in harmony with His will. This hunger for God is matched by the hardly less noble hunger for truth. What the world needs now as always is the completer mating of goodness and intelligence. Now, thank God, there is no law against this marriage. Science can say nothing against it. In spite of the past century's record of marvelous achievements, science stands confessedly bankrupt before the central mysteries of nature and life. Ask your chemist, for example, why the element carbon and the element oxygen come together and produce a substance, carbonic acid gas, unlike its two constituents. He will answer, chemical affinity. But

what is chemical affinity? He will answer, "I do not know." Your beaming biologist can hardly be induced to look up from his microscope, but you may ask him what he is watching. He will answer, Protoplasm. But what is that? He will reply, "It is the physical basis of life." But what is life? First and last, he will admit that he does not know. Ask the professor of physics what light is. He will say with complacency and assurance, light is vibrations of the ether of a certain amplitude. But what is ether and what makes it vibrate? He will not be able to get beyond the famous definition of Lord Salisbury, who was not only Prime Minister of Great Britain, but at one time president of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. "Ether," said he, "ether is the nominative case of the verb to undulate." Your psychologist is a man of nimble wit, and it may be difficult to corner him with any definite question. With adequate industry, however, you may be able to put your question, What is thought? He is given to great swelling words about the nerve process and the thought process, their parallelism and their interdependence, but at last you will force him to admit that he does not know. And there is personality. It is a fact of nature and a matter for scientific investigation. But science cannot explain Paul, who swept across the Roman Empire like a beneficent flame, or St. Francis, or Plato, or Shakespeare. And these several inquiries are precisely the ones about which we are concerned, the central mysteries, before which science stands in a helpless impotence. Manifestly science cannot discredit faith. Its symbols, according to Clerk Maxwell, are the balance, the footrule, and the clock. The deeper things of

life are beyond their reach. The method and apparatus of science are inapplicable. The distinguished biologist and interpreter of Darwin, George Romanes, in his early life, wrote an essay on theism in which he dealt with the question of the existence of God by rigorous rational processes. He reached sadly a wholly negative conclusion. And yet, in the very presence of this deliverance of his reason, his heart cried out after God. Before his death he came to see that the deliverances of our moral and spiritual faculties are in their proper sphere just as legitimate and reliable as the deliverances of the reason are in its proper sphere. He died in full communion with the church of Jesus Christ.

And certainly Christianity can say nothing against the marriage of goodness and enlightenment. It demands it. It is the secret of goodness, and enlightenment is its instrument. There are two forms of infidelity which I am afraid even the Infinite Mercy will find it difficult to forgive. One is the fear lest the truth be bad; the fear that the Spirit of truth will not guide us into all the truth, will not glorify Christ as the theme, origin, and end of all truth. Christ said Himself, I am the Truth. Welcome Truth. Lay hold upon her. She is your life. And do not stop to calculate the adjustment and revision her fresh coming will necessitate. Welcome her, and the old truth, after the method of all life, will organize itself about the new revelation. For Truth is sovereign. She comes from God and bears His message, from whatever quarter her great eyes may look down upon you. Out of the starry deeps, illimitable and radiant, she comes to say, "The heavens declare the glory of God." Out of the museum of the aeons, where on stony pages

aspiring life records her defeats and her successes, she comes to say, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, the herb yielding seed, the beast of the earth after its kind, and of the dust of the ground man in His own image." Out of far climes and dim days, through the blunders and sins and tragedies of history down to the blind jeopardies of the last wild game of war, she comes to say, "The Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever He will." Out of the laboratories of the world, where keen eyes and skilled fingers pick reverently a little path of light into the mystery which envelops our life, she comes to say, "The invisible things of God are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even His everlasting power and divinity."

Eighty-eight years ago Wake Forest College set up her banner and, in the name of Christ, laid claim to all the realms of culture—literature, art, history, philosophy, religion, science. And she has made that claim good by imposing His interpretation and His law on them all, by exacting tribute from them all for the extension of His reign of righteousness and good will.

A second form of infidelity and lapse of loyalty which makes heavy demands upon the Infinite Grace is doubt of the ultimate triumph of God's purpose of redemption in Christ, the fear that Christ will see of the travail of His soul, and not be satisfied. No, no. By the burdens He has lifted, by the doors He has opened, by the fetters he has broken, by the rising levels of life wherever He has walked among men, by the hopes which He kindled in His own dark time brightening through the centuries to this august hour, His dream is coming true. Do you not see already

the kings and the nations bringing their glory unto Him? In moments of a lofty clairvoyance do we not hear what must be the great voices in Heaven singing, "The kingdom of the world is become the kingdom of our Lord and His Christ; and He shall reign forever and ever?"

We may hasten this glad consummation by an unwavering loyalty and devotion; by keeping Christ in the center of all our education; by stopping our piddling with this great instrument of the Kingdom—we should put into education four times the money we now propose; by—I will say it—looking to Him, not at one another. We are on a campaign to recover to our Lord a rebel world, and we talk of division. One thinks he thinks this, another remembers to have read somewhere that. "I am for him!" cries one. "No, I am for this leader!" Was Paul crucified for you? Did Peter call you to a high calling in Christ Jesus? Did Apollos set you your task to redeem the world? Let us have done with our questionings, and follow where He leads. We shall be together, if we follow Him. Yonder gleams His banner above the battle line. Have done with these debates in the rear. Up and after Him through blood and tears, after Him to victory!