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WHY WE STUDY THE NEW TESTAMENT

THE BIBLE AND THE CHURCH

The book called the Bible is about sixteen hundred years old and parts of it are much older than that. But of course it has not been obtainable in English for anything like so long. Very few books either old or new get translated out of the languages in which they were originally written; when people set out to do this very difficult job it must be for an important purpose. The Bible has now been translated into more languages than any other book and this has been done with the idea that the people who use all these different languages shall be able to read it, or at any rate hear it read, in their own language.

We take all this very much for granted but perhaps it is worth stopping to ask why it has been done. Would it not have saved a lot of trouble if the few people who can read the book in the original languages just told the rest of us what is in it? Some people do believe that this would be the best thing and that specialists should be trained and made responsible for doing it. But many more have held the opposite view and a lot of hard work has been put into translating the Bible. This has been done so that people could know the Bible in their own language; though when you look at some of the English translations which are still used they do not give this impression because the English is so different from what we use today. English, like every living language, changes just because it is alive and that is why a new translation, the New English Bible,

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is being made now and why in years to come others will have to be made for our descendants.

Before translations are made, ordinary people can see and listen to the Bible only in a language strange to them. This was how it was in Europe before the reawakening of interest in scholarship, which we call the Renaissance, in the sixteenth century. The Bible was used, of course, in church; but it was in a Latin translation and the service was in Latin and the congregation had to depend on the clergy if they wanted an explanation in their own language. It seems that the time came when even some of the clergy were not sufficiently well educated to give this, and so the Bible had practically become a closed book. Then two things happened, both of which helped to bring it to life again. In the fifteenth century, manuscripts (hand-written copies) of Bibles in the original languages of Hebrew and Greek were brought into Europe and this was a great incentive to scholars. At the same time there was an urgent demand from some groups of people in the Church that the Bible should be translated into the languages of their own time so that it could be understood by people who did not know any of the old languages.

There had been some translations into English before this but they had not come into general use because they belonged to the early attempts to reform the Church. These early attempts were very unpopular with the authorities and they had been ruthlessly suppressed. All the writings associated with them were destroyed, except for the ones that were hidden away and not found till afterwards.

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READING THE BIBLE

Eventually, however, great changes were made, especially during the Reformation in the sixteenth century. The most obvious practical result of the reforms in England was that services were held in English and the Bible too was translated so that it could be open to everybody. It was not open in the sense that everybody could read it for himself because even at that time only a few people could read at all. But it was open in the sense that clergy and other educated people had an English translation which they could use and which other people could hear and enjoy. By this time printing had been invented and that meant that many more copies could be made available more easily. The translating had been done by scholars and it was agreed that they had made a good version of the original as they knew it. In 1611 the translation which is still known in England as the Authorized Version was published and in their preface the translators said:

When Your Highness [King James] had once out of deep judgment apprehended how convenient it was, that out of the Original Sacred Tongues, together with comparing of the labours, both in our own, and other foreign Languages, of many worthy men who went before us, there should be one more exact Translation of the holy Scriptures into the English Tongue; Your Majesty did never desist to urge and to excite those to whom it was commended, that the work might be hastened, and that the business might be expedited in so decent a manner, as a matter of such importance might justly require.

This translation is also known as the King James Version and it was a magnificent piece of work. It has commanded great respect and deep affection and the hopes of those who sponsored and produced it have certainly been

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fulfilled over a long span of time. It has remained virtually unchallenged as the English Bible until relatively recent times. In the nineteenth century, when there began to be much more education, this Bible was used a good deal in schools as well as churches and got to be much more widely known than before. Quite a lot of it is fairly familiar, people have a general idea they know what is in it; sometimes they quote it, quite often they *misquote* it.

But the wording, the structure of the sentences, everything about that preface sounds very strange now; we almost need to translate it. And in the translation itself many words and phrases are no longer used in English, or are used in different ways. For example, in Mark 10: 14 'Suffer the little children to come unto me' is now 'Let the children come to me'; in Acts 7: 20 Moses is described as 'exceeding fair' but now as 'a fine child'; in 1 Pet. 4: 5 'the quick and the dead' is now 'the living and the dead'. A language which is alive and being used is bound to change; the faster the rate of social change the more rapidly the language changes. Those seventeenth-century translators said it was 'convenient' that there should be 'a more exact Translation'. We would not say that now; we would say that 'a new translation is a good idea'. The last three hundred years have seen very great changes of every kind and for some time it has been urgent that there should be a new English translation.

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The urgent need for this is not only because the English of this century is so different from that of the seventeenth. Changes in language are not the only changes which have to be taken into account. By the end of the nineteenth

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century so many more early manuscripts had been found and so much new light had been shed on the old ones that some revision of the 1611 version was essential. Scholars both in England and America worked on this and the English Revised Version of the New Testament was published in 1881, of the Old Testament in 1885, and the American Standard Version was published in 1901. But these people were not making a new translation; two of the principles laid down for the guidance of the English revisers were:

1. To introduce as few alterations as possible into the Text of the Authorised Version consistently with faithfulness.
2. To limit, as far as possible, the expression of such alterations to the language of the Authorised and earlier English Versions.

So naturally the language still sounds just as old-fashioned. The American version of 1901 has been further revised and was published as the Revised Standard Version in 1952. But the New English Bible which is being produced now is a new translation; a translation into the language which is used now and using words in the meanings which they have now. This gives people a much better chance of understanding what they are reading, but there is more to it than just the words used. All the books in the Bible are old; they were written a long time ago and translating them into modern languages does not translate them into modern ideas or even by itself clarify the meaning of the old ideas.

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PREPARING TO READ THE NEW TESTAMENT

While the new information about early manuscripts has been coming in we have been gathering information about a lot of other subjects which help us to understand the ideas. We have learnt a lot about the life and history of the first Christians, how their beliefs crystallized in the early days. Besides this we have discovered a good deal more about the general background of New Testament times which helps to show what sort of impression Christianity must have made then. It looks as though the writers did not always find it easy to explain themselves clearly and simply even to their contemporaries, but it is not hard to understand the reason for this. They were writing about something which had almost completely overwhelmed the first disciples, so it is not surprising that they were sometimes at a loss for words, even when they were writing about it later on. They were absolutely certain that the death of Jesus had not been just the tragic end of a powerful and attractive teacher who had become unpopular with the authorities. Nor did they think that he had been just another unsuccessful Messiah (Hebrew for an anointed leader; the Greek translation is Christ). They believed that God had raised Jesus from death and that he was alive amongst them and working with them. This was the only way they could find to interpret their experience.

It was not only people who had known Jesus in what is generally called his earthly life who believed these things. The Church grew because others who had not been amongst his followers were convinced by the apostles' proclamation. They joined the company and shared its new life. Their certainty that Jesus is alive was a strong

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bond of fellowship amongst them: they were thrilled and excited by it and they thanked God for it. But it involved more than that. Because they believed that God had raised Jesus from death they believed that something new was actually happening. They expected that a final great climax would come quite soon. No wonder they wanted to share all this with other people and no wonder they had some difficulty in expressing themselves.

We can understand better what they were saying when we know more about what people believed in those days and what they were hoping for: we can see how important the Christian proclamation was to people and why it was such tremendously good news. We realize too how difficult it must have been to see, after the first shock of excitement, just what difference it was going to make in practice. They compared what was being proclaimed with what they had expected and because the proclamation partly agreed with the expectation they thought it would continue to do so. Because they had expected the coming of the Messiah to be just before the end of the world and they believed that Jesus was the true Messiah they thought the end of the world would be very soon. But the end of the world did not come. When they found that life was going on longer than they had expected, they began to think more about what practical differences their new beliefs were going to make. This is what has been going on ever since. Christians look at the world in which they live in the light of their belief that God maintains it and ceaselessly cares for it and desires the well-being of all its inhabitants. The Jews had already learned to believe this and they believed too that God had made an agreement, or covenant, with their ancestors. This was associated for them with their obligation to keep the

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Jewish Law; the trouble was that they knew they had failed to keep it.

Christians say that God has made a new covenant. The word 'testament' is another word for covenant, or agreement. The New Testament means the new covenant, or agreement, which God made through Jesus Christ. The phrase came to be used as a title for the collection of books which tell us about how it was made and what it means. Over and over again Christians have to think out how this applies to their own times and discover how to proclaim this message of good news so that it can be recognized for the good news it is. The message is handed down in the traditional language and it is proclaimed sometimes in the old phrases, sometimes in new interpretations. Language changes, conditions change; but the proclamation is always a proclamation about God and what he has done.

'Are you the only person staying in Jerusalem not to know what has happened there in the last few days?' 'What do you mean?' he said. 'All this about Jesus of Nazareth,' they replied, 'a prophet powerful in speech and action before God and the whole people; how our chief priests and rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and crucified him. But we had been hoping that he was the man to liberate Israel. What is more, this is the third day since it happened, and now some women of our company have astounded us: they went early to the tomb, but failed to find his body, and returned with a story that they had seen a vision of angels who told them he was alive' (Luke 24: 18-23).

The New Testament has been so important in the life of the Church for all these centuries because in it there is the witness of the first people who believed and proclaimed these things. The books have been studied and

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cherished and translated because people have believed that what is proclaimed there about God and his dealings with men is true. The Church has always harked back to the authority of the New Testament both because the evidence is there and because as time has gone on more and more people have become more and more convinced of the truth of it. It is because the New Testament is this kind of book and not just a great moral classic or hero story that it has to be studied in this special way. To help to do this we have the New English Bible and the Cambridge Bible Commentary, with this book of general introduction telling about the historical, cultural and religious background, about how the books came to be written and about how they have been transmitted to us.

Most people who come to the study of the New Testament already have some ideas about Jesus Christ. The purpose of real study is not just to find support for the ideas which we already have but to examine them, probably to add to them and to investigate the basis of them all and try to discover why they have been such a powerful influence in history for all these centuries. The social and cultural background of the twentieth century is in most parts of the world very different from that of the countries on the shores of the Mediterranean two thousand years ago, but many of the questions men ask are the same and many of the decisions they have to take are about the same issues. Social and political problems arise in new forms and religious questions are asked in new words. The writers of the New Testament books believed that what they were writing about was of fundamental, timeless significance for man's understanding of himself and of his history. The books were not written before a lot of discussion had gone on about the meaning

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of 'all this about Jesus of Nazareth' and it has gone on ever since amongst scholars and amongst ordinary people as well. It is going on still, and over and over again the New Testament itself is re-read and thought about in relation to new questions as they arise. It is exciting to be doing this in the second half of the twentieth century when so much new help is available to many more people.