

I

The Learner

The word “disciple” is generally taken to mean a person whose chief concern is with learning; he is essentially a learner, and there we may begin. For the New Testament shows us in the Gospels and Acts a group of men who are, before all else, learners. They are moving about in worlds not realized. This is sometimes forgotten, but the recovery of the fact will give to our study of the New Testament a renewed zest, a fresh objective. From the beginning the story of the Christian life can be summed up in the refrain of the Keswick hymn, “I am finding out the greatness of Thy loving heart”. Jesus Christ was, in the language that we learn from Natural Science, a new fact; and the value of a new fact is not realized quickly, unless it be a very trivial one. Men take time to realize Jesus; He is so like the great familiar facts of Nature, so rich in surprises, so many-faceted. All that God does, wrote Tertullian, is marked by two things, simplicity and power. Jesus has both; and in both aspects He claims study. The disciple is a learner.

In the first place, we have to think of the unexpected Christ. Jesus did not answer to popular expectations, nor was He the Messiah of the books. He was not a figure of wonder; He was neither king nor conqueror; He did not restore the kingdom of Israel; He did nothing that was commonly expected of the Messiah. To cover this lack, the early Christian fell back upon the Old

Testament, and devised a scheme of proof texts to show (as it has been summed up) that all Scripture predicts a Messiah; that everything predicted of the Messiah befel Christ; and that all that befel Christ was predicted, and was predicted of the Messiah. “Out of Egypt have I called my son” is cited by Matthew; but a reference to the original connexion shows that it did not and could not refer to the Messiah. But they went further afield; the horns of the unicorn were turned into the two beams of the cross; the 318 servants of Abraham into a riddle of the crucifixion; for 18 in *Greek* character is IH, the first two letters of Jesus, and 300 is T, a picture of the cross. The method stripped the Old Testament of its natural meaning, and gave it another. No one, however, reading the Old Testament in its natural sense and before the event, could have dreamt of this style of interpretation or have foreseen that Jesus would be what He was; He remains the unexpected Christ.

He implies (if one may put it so) an unexpected God. Jesus, as we recognize more and more, has changed, transformed or developed every conception of God that man has had; and the process is by no means finished. Much of the content we give to the word God is still demonstrably pre-Christian and hard to reconcile with the mind of Christ. God had to be re-considered by the disciple, re-thought in the light of Christ. Nature had given little hint of what God would prove to be; even if the writer of “The Wisdom of Solomon” calls Him “the first author of beauty”. It is not easy to believe in the love of God; it has taken all the force of Jesus’ personality to make men believe in it. Nature there is indistinct in her evidence. It was not easy for the Gentile

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-43306-9 - The Disciple
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to accept One God and no other, though we have the testimony of the Gentiles who came to the belief and found a peace in it, which it costs us an effort to understand, who have not grown up in polytheism. But for Jesus, God was One, and supreme, and Father in the fullest and most loving sense of the word. That is very well; but one never has really grasped an idea till one has brought it to bear on the full circle of one's experience of life. Even if we accept Jesus' conception of God, as a proposition, it takes a lifetime, many lifetimes in fact, to translate it into life, or to bring out its relevance to experience. The disciple, who has risen so high as to take in the Master's central idea, is more than ever a learner.

Greek philosophers—and we must realize in all fairness that they were the best minds of the world—refused to associate love with God; many would hardly allow God personality, or even existence as we understand it; and most held Plato's conviction that, if you could by searching find out God, you could not make God intelligible to the mass of men. Decidedly the God of Jesus was unexpected, and the early Christian had much to learn.

To pass on to something more general: Every original thinker is confronted with the difficulty that he has only old language in which to convey new ideas. Nothing is harder than to get men to give a new meaning to an old word; and when the new ideas were so surprising and so unexpected as in the Christian message, the dead-set notions of men were more difficult than ever to quicken into any life. The disciple had to be teacher and learner at once. He, too, had old notions, which he must correct by new intuition and new experiment. He had to orient

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himself to his Master. The real education, as we have hinted, is, first, not so much to take in *what* the Master says, but *how* the Master thinks it, *why* He thinks so, and how *He* reacts to it; and, then, after that, the disciple has to learn how to teach other men the lesson; and there his learning begins all over again. This is far from being loss; it means a firmer grip on what he has learned, and ever new enlightenment as he wrestles with the new truth, to force it somehow into the minds of reluctant men—reluctant, for, however willing men at Athens or elsewhere may be to hear some new thing, few are eager to undertake the great intellectual labour of re-thinking all life on the basis of a new principle.

The matter belongs more properly to a later paper of this series, but here it must at least be said that all Theology lay ahead of these New Testament disciples. There are simple-minded natures who will hold that they were better without Theology; but no Christian has a right to be quite so simple-minded. If Christ cannot face up to the best and the truest of human thought, He cannot much help the best of men—or the worst, either. Here once more the Christian has to be a learner.

Then, again, the Christian message was to be proclaimed in a world actually existing—to real people in this or that synagogue, at this or the other street corner, in the market-place. These people were tradesmen, tax-collectors, slaves and slave-owners, thieves, parents, husbands, sons, good and bad citizens, men living in a whole network of human relations, domestic, social, economic, political. What was the bearing of the Christian message on these relations? Could a Christian be a magistrate, a thief, a slave-owner? There was nothing

to hinder any one of these enjoying to the full the sacraments and mysteries of Paganism. Truth, tenderness, purity—these are Christian words, for us only interpretable in terms of Christ. But we are talking of an age nineteen centuries ago. Every virtue and every vice needed to be looked at again in the light of Christ. There is a new standard for every duty, and there are endless new duties; there is a new spiritual significance in every thought or act; new ideals are to re-create commonplace lives and make dull virtues joyous; the Christian propaganda is to be carried on by means of re-created lives. But how? and the details? and the bearing of thought on act? and what is allowable, and what not? All conduct has to be re-thought. The Christian is indeed a learner.

Learner he was, and he learned his lessons, and men of nineteen centuries have been his debtors for the way in which he did it.

II

The New Man

One thing is outstanding in the New Testament—it is a *New Testament*, a “new covenant” in the words of Jeremiah quoted by the writer to the Hebrews; it tells of a new relation to God, fundamentally new, that makes everything else new. “If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature”, says our Authorized Version; and it is true, and perhaps it is what Paul meant to say at that point. But the Greek may be equally well rendered “it is a new creation”; and that also is a Pauline thought. “Behold, I make all things new”, we read elsewhere; and in other passages we find newness of life, the new song, and so forth. Among other things we find “the new man”, with various significance. In Ephesians iv. 24, the new man may conceivably be Christ; but, even if that is so, the Christian is to be clad with the new man—in plain words he is to be a new man himself.

In one phrase and another the same idea is put forward. The Fourth Gospel speaks of a man being born again. Now, as Matthew Arnold used to point out, all these New Testament phrases were more or less new-coined—“thrown out” (as he put it) to express a new idea; they were not technical terms, still less legal terms as some of them became in the hands of lawyers. (In passing one may hazard the query whether a lawyer is ever quite converted. Law and grace is very like an antithesis in Paul; and partially converted lawyers have not been able

to leave grace a charming sound. One could wish they were either quite converted or not at all.) Born again—it is Paul’s conception, put more forcibly, some will say—a man made over again, made differently, and made different. The Apologists of the second century tell the heathen that Christians are a “new race”; Gentiles and Jews, the world knew already; this is a different species. What was most outstanding about it was that every individual in the new race was made new.

The process, and the state to which the process leads, are called in the New Testament Salvation. The term Saviour is applied to Christ chiefly in the later parts of the New Testament—a fact that strikes one oddly, till one realizes that it had pagan and royal suggestions, which the Christian might wish to avoid. The reticences of the early Church are worth study; they do not idly talk of “the cross”, they do not shirk it, but they do not flaunt it, and they never carved a crucifix for some centuries. Salvation, like Grace and all the great words, has suffered from being handled by little people. It has been cut down by some to mean little more than escape from hell, which on the whole relegates it to the next world and makes it a future possession. But it has a larger significance that brings it back into the present.

There is evidence ancient and modern that in some quarters of the world men have begun by interpreting salvation as freedom from the assaults of demons, or as victory over demons. In certain areas of the heathen world to-day we read that this conception of salvation is the great appeal of the Gospel to men and women hagridden with the fear of evil spirits. Primitive medicine seems to start with the thought that all disease is the work

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-43306-9 - The Disciple
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of evil spirits, acting on their own account or set in motion by persons who control them. We find such views in Tertullian, the great Apologist of the second century, and to-day on the Congo river. On one side, the idea is not so absurd as it may seem to elementary scientists. The primitive world explained drunkenness and hysteria as possession by some alien spirit; the reader will note, of course, that spirit is a word of many connotations. Drunkenness caused an apparent change of voice, mind and personality; but in time its mystery was lost, and it was attributed to the physical properties of wine; but why should the mental or intellectual nature so respond to a merely physical stimulus? In hysteria, in the mystical state, there was no visible stimulus. Moral lapses in like manner were attributed to demon-possession. So that a salvation, which liberates from demons, may be moral, and not quite ludicrous. But the early church had better psychologists, who read the human mind and the human heart as well as most of us to-day.

St Augustine, in the fourth and fifth centuries, is a very great psychologist; and he, like St Paul, with whom he has strong affinities, found that he was unable to compel himself to do what he saw quite clearly he ought to do. The mind willed to do right; and he did not do right; because, as he saw, he or his mind did not *wholly* will it, and what he calls "the violence of habit" was too strong for him; he was subject to "the law of sin". In the Pauline epistles, especially in Romans vii, we have the same story. The metaphors of Paul are notable here; men are "darkened in mind" (Eph. iv. 18); mind and conscience are "stained" (Tit. i. 15); they are "cauterized in the conscience" (1 Tim. iv. 2); the whole mind becomes

useless (Rom. i. 28); they are alienated from the life of God (Eph. iv. 18). St Augustine speaks in the same way of the “mind in disorder”; and Marcus Aurelius, the Stoic emperor, of a mind being stained by the pictures it presents to itself. Not enough has been made by Christian thinkers of this Pauline conception of the real damnation being the distraction of the mind, at once by the loss of its power to apprehend and of its power to decide and carry decision into action. From all this breakdown of the mind and of the whole nature the Christian is saved. He becomes a new man.

But we have to consider for what he is saved. He is restored to sanity, to sound judgment, to the mind intact and competent. He is saved (in the striking phrase of Hebr. x. 39) to regain possession of his soul. Paul again, in a passage which conscientious editors mishandle out of deference to timid copyists of MSS, declares the great feature of salvation to be that “we have peace with God” (Rom. v. 1). The Stoics had begun by saying that man to be happy must live conformably—not the most lucid of thoughts, till they revised it to run “live conformably with Nature”. A man to be at peace with himself must have peace with God, and that is the real newness of life, and it leads to all sorts of new experiences which make a new creation. Peace with God, peace with conscience, peace with men, the intellectual and moral nature in harmony with itself and able to perform all its God-given functions well and truly—that is the new man, a very new man indeed in some cases.

Lastly, by what is the new man saved? Two expressions are outstanding in the New Testament to describe the source of this salvation; the blood of Christ recurs

constantly, but there is also the will of Christ (Hebr. x. 10). The two are one. There is hardly a vestige of evidence in the New Testament for the notion held by some that the physical blood of Jesus is of spiritual value or potency. Throughout blood is a short way of describing the sacrifice and death of Christ, a way that wakes memories of old rituals which He has superseded. This last fact is brought out by the writer to the Hebrews, who stresses the will of Christ. The “will” of Christ interprets Himself and His mind; it is very nearly, in our clumsy modern phrase, His personality. Christ’s mind interprets God’s mind; and when God’s mind is interpreted to us, it becomes possible for us to be reconciled with God. The new man is conscious of this reconciliation, and it means happiness, a new creation indeed.

Anyone who will try to handle such matters in short compass, will find that he fails to satisfy either his conscience or his friends; but a man’s friends will be apt to read his shorthand. Let it suffice here to have reminded the reader that the disciple in the New Testament is conscious of a new experience found in Christ, of a new relation with God, a new happiness, and a new outlook on life; everything is different—“Behold! I make all things new.”