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ESSENTIAL CHRISTIANITY

A WAY OF LIFE

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1. What does the Christian Church usually seem to regard as essential in Christianity? Is it not first a credal statement? This is illustrated in many ways:—

(a) The World Council of Churches consists of those Churches which accept Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures. In other words, an intellectual decision in answering the question, "Who is Jesus Christ" is the essential in determining who is to be admitted to the World Council of Churches. Again, in view of the proposal that the Congregational, the Methodist and the Presbyterian Churches should unite, a Commission was appointed which drew up a long credal statement.

(b) The Church is concerned with authority, the authority given by Councils or Assemblies or Conferences, to certain individuals appointed to positions as ministers or Clerks or Bishops etc., and to preside at certain sacraments.

(c) Is not the official Church too much concerned with money, to the neglect of what is essential? It is true that "the labourer is worthy of his hire" (Luke 10:7), ("The labourer deserves his wages" R.S.V.). But in the April, 1969, issue of "THE MODERN CHURCH-MAN", in the leading article on the first page, we read,

"The first question is all-embracing. Do you consider the present way in which the Church handles the care, deployment and payment of the clergy is unsatisfactory . . . ? . . . In recent years much has been done to raise the stipends of the clergy".

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It may be justly claimed that adequate payment of the clergy is an essential element in Christianity. But is the Church simply following the world in seeking to raise ministers' stipends to the level of salaries of able men in secular callings, and to provide for Sabbatical leave at an expense enjoyed by comparatively few men in secular callings? Are we, in so much care over financial rewards, losing sight of the great essentials of Christianity? Are we beginning to love ourselves a bit more than our neighbours?

Of course we need a Church; but must not that Church be founded on the truth, and be concerned far more about the Kingdom of God than about authority and money?

2. Many of our leading theologians seem to support the orthodox creeds.

It is remarkable how even such a liberal minded theologian as Nels Ferre claims that "Jesus became the actual Mediator of the knowledge, the presence and the power of God to forgive and to change human nature and human history . . . Whoever comes into the right relationship to God, comes in fact to Jesus Christ, to God as AGAPE (love). For this reason there is no other name by which we must be saved" ("CHRIST AND THE CHRISTIAN" p.218).

If we go to Bultmann's "THEOLOGY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT" e.g. P.76, we may read, "Faith is not an act that can be consummated by man on his own initiative, as if Jesus were only the 'impulse' toward it. Rather, it is exactly Jesus toward whom faith is directed: he who is the way, the truth and the life, and without whom no one comes to the Father".

In these sentences of Bultmann are we not encouraged to forget Jesus' words, "Have faith in God" (Mark 11:22)? Are Jesus' words and Jesus' ways too simple and too direct for theologians? Is it wrong to

accept the Kingdom of God, the rule of God in our life, as a little child? Can we have faith in God only if it is complicated by theology?

Is it true that we can come to God only through Jesus Christ? Is this what Jesus taught? If so, what did he mean by saying, "When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret" (Matt. 6:6)? Did he not teach then that we all have direct access to God who is our Father, without any intermediary?

Again we find in Bultmann ("THEOLOGY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT" p.75), "For John, as for Paul, faith is the way to salvation, the only way. However, 'by faith alone' is so taken for granted by John that he does not explicitly emphasize it". There may be some truth in the idea that we are saved by faith. Jesus taught us to have faith in God. But is not this idea of faith in Christ rather the teaching of Paul and the Church than the teaching of Jesus? Are we to discard Jesus' words, "You will know them by their fruits. Not every one who says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the Kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:20-21), and are we to dismiss the picture of the last judgement, "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom . . . for I was hungry and you gave me food" (Matt. 25:34-35)?

The Righteous are commended, not because they confessed to a certain dogma, but because they showed loving kindness to their neighbours.

Is belief that Jesus was the Christ a ticket to heaven? Schleiermacher says, "Christianity is a monotheistic faith . . . and is essentially distinguished from other such faiths because in it everything is related to the redemption accomplished by Jesus of Nazareth" (quoted by Henry P. van Dusen, "LIBERAL THEOLOGY" p. 178).

Did Jesus emphasise or preach this redemption?

3. But some of our leading theologians point to Jesus' life and teaching. Did not Jesus teach a way of life?

Henry van Dusen says, "The Christian interpretation of Christ himself need not go beyond Jesus' own declarations . . . The Movement which advances his mission in the world, finds its reality in the only concept which commanded Jesus' absolute loyalty — the Kingdom of God" (pp. 147, 148, "VINDICATION OF LIBERAL THEOLOGY").

It is a great pity that Dr. Samuel Angus's book, "ESSENTIAL CHRISTIANITY", is now out of print. It was first printed in 1939.

Dr. Angus says, "Christianity is a experience, which has been too often confounded with theories or explanations of that experience" (p.12). "Christianity has too often been confounded with, or even based upon, alleged historic facts of debateable historicity (such as the Virgin Birth, the miracles, the physical resurrection of Jesus, the bodily Ascension to heaven, the official and authoritative establishment of a Church by him), and with certain dogmatic interpretations of historical facts and of alleged historic facts (such as theories of propitiatory Atonement to explain the nature or need of the death of Christ, or dogmas concerning the origin and saving value of sacraments)" p. 12.

Gunther Bornkamm, although he calls his book, "JESUS OF NAZARETH", yet looks beyond Jesus to the God whom Jesus preached and whose love he revealed. He says, "To live on the basis of God's presence and in expectation of his future, this is what Jesus aims at in his commandment, 'That you may be the children of your Father who is in Heaven!' ", Bornkamm continues, "This is where Jesus'

message of the approach of the Kingdom of heaven and his preaching of the will of God become completely one. Both show forth the pure and unveiled will of God", (p.108). This, of course, is shown in the Lord's prayer. "Thy Kingdom come", is explained in the next prayer, "Thy will be done on earth". This is central in Jesus' teaching. Bornkamm says, "It has become customary for theologians to engage in many-sided reflections on Christ's saving work . . . It is significant that in all these passages (the Beatitudes, Matthew 5:3-10). Jesus never mentions himself" (p.108).

Rev. Ben. T. Butcher (now 92 years of age, after 34 years of missionary work among head-hunters in Papua) writes in his inspiring book, "MANY FAITHS — ONE ESSENTIAL", "Gandhi remained a Hindu. 'I rebel', he (Gandhi) writes, 'against orthodox Christianity, for I am convinced it has distorted the message of Jesus" (p.112). But Gandhi was equally ready to criticise the teachings of Hinduism that have issued in the practice of Child Marriage and the Caste System". Mr. Butcher continues, " 'Prayer', said Gandhi, 'has saved my life. Without it I should have been a lunatic long ago.' Gandhi failed, as did Jesus, in much he sought to accomplish, but India and the world are the better for what he did and taught". Mr. Butcher says, "There is much in my own religion that I cannot believe, but I can still worship with my fellow Christians, for I believe that love as a way of life, is the one essential in all religion, and we have seen how Jew and Christian, Hindu and Moslem unite in this belief. It is God's way, the way of the Spirit. Love is the greatest thing in the world . . . the hardest to practise, but it is the only way that offers hope for all mankind — and it is for all people" (pp. 114-116).

Professor Lloyd Geering in his book, "GOD IN THE NEW WORLD", has much to say that points in the same direction:— "It is true that in God we live and move and have our being" (p.156). "Christians must rediscover the this-worldly hope which has always been there in their best known prayer, 'Thy

Kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven'. The renewal of the world is the Christian hope" (p. 162). "All men and the whole world have only one end, and that end, so faith enables us to say, is in God, who has neither beginning nor end" (p.163). "Out of the Old Testament Jesus took the two basic commandments about love. Jesus showed that these two commandments belong together . . . One cannot love God unless one also loves one's fellowmen(p.166). "Christianity is essentially a faith to be lived" (p.17). "It is widely accepted nowadays that Jesus had no thought of founding a Church embodying all the ecclesiastical structure that we associate with the word" (p.173). In the early Christian community, "there were no priests, no paid officials, no uniformity of practice, and the bare minimum of organisation . . . There were the fruits of what they found to be the power of God in the community of faith . . . Jesus had founded no church of the kind that we know. But he had spoken consistently of the Kingdom of God, or the rule of God in the lives of men. Much of the original teaching of Jesus seems to have consisted of the parables of the Kingdom, which highlighted various aspects of the life of the community of faith". "That which is permanent in the Church is not its structure, its doctrinal confessions and its liturgies, but its faith" (pp. 176, 177). "The Christian is called to the way of the cross not for any self-gain either in this life or beyond death, but simply and solely out of the love of God and one's fellows. The Christian looks in faith to the God whose Word of life he had heard in the man Jesus" (p. 184).

Nuri Mass, in her wonderful book, "MANY PATHS – ONE HEAVEN", after speaking of the great religions of the world that have survived for centuries, mentions also "the new religion called Baha'i" and the movement called Moral Rearmament and its standards – absolute unselfishness, purity, honesty and love. She mentions Christian Science and she says, "There are other movements and other people too numerous to mention, all thinking along the same lines of unity and brother-

hood. . . . Whether they be Hindu, Moslem, Sikh, Confucian, Taoist, Hebrew, Buddhist or Christian – the aspiration is always the same. It is the highest point of all religions, the brightest star in the heaven of human experience. It is perfect love, and with it perfect peace – Millenium, Nirvana, Paradise" (pp.124, 125).

4. Are we to say that Gandhi was not a Christian because he did not join any Christian Church? Are we to say further that he would be rejected by God because he was not a Christian?

Gandhi says, "God is Life, Truth, Light. He is Love. He is the Supreme God . . . This belief in God has to be based on faith which transcends reason" (p. 57). "I am endeavouring to see God through service of humanity, for I know that God is neither in heaven, nor down below, but in everyone" (p. 59).

Are we to say that Najmeh Najafi has not the essentials of Christianity, because she is a Moslem, and has never joined a Christian Church? In her book, "REVEILLE FOR A PERSIAN VILLAGE", she tells the story of how the village of Sarbandan was wonderfully blessed and revolutionised by her loving, self-sacrificing work among the poor people of Sarbandan. She believes in God, in prayer, loves God and fellow men, and lives a life of self-sacrifice and service, Is she not essentially a Christian?

Are we going to say that Tenko-san was no Christian, because, though he founded the community of Ittoen in Japan and lived a life of poverty, service and love for 60 years, living to the age of 95, yet he did not join a Christian Church? His book, "A NEW PATH TO ANCIENT TRUTH", (Geo. Allen & Unwin, London) describes this way of life called Ittoen. Tenko-san says, "Ittoen is not a religion; it is a way of life". People may live in this way of life whether they are Buddhists or Moslems or Christians, It is a way of life guided by Light or God, a life of humble service,

self-sacrifice and love in which each member accepts blame for the sins of the world in the same spirit in which Jesus died on the cross”.

5. Why does the Church so commonly avoid the teaching of Comparative Religion? Is intolerance an essential of Christianity?

Is not the Church too neglectful of the truth and good in other religions?

In our Presbyterian Theological course in New South Wales not even for one year is Comparative Religion studied as a separate subject. Are commentaries on the Apostles' Creed more important than anything in Radhakrishnan's Indian Philosophy or Gandhi's "IN SEARCH OF THE SUPREME", or his "ALL MEN ARE BROTHERS"?

As Rev. Margaret Barr says in "THE GREAT UNITY", "Even a very superficial survey suffices to shatter the illusion that the various religious systems are wholly separate from and independent of one another. The so-called 'founders' of the great religious systems were not consciously or intentionally founders at all, but reformers" (p. 78).

The study of Comparative Religion will not be—little Jesus Christ. It may well reveal him more fully as the greatest revelation of God the world has ever seen. But there is no need to neglect other great revelations of God. Jesus could see a revelation of God in the lilies, and in the poor widow, and in the prophets who preceded him.

6. What is the effect of this authoritarian attitude of the Christian Church which excludes those who will not subscribe to certain dogmas some of which were not taught by Jesus? Has not the effect been that many people pass by the Christian Church? Gandhi

did not become a member of the Christian Church, neither did Najmeh Najafi nor Tenko-san. It may be true that other reasons, such as love of money, love of pleasure, love of self, are far more effective in keeping people out of the Church. But if the Church, instead of stressing creed, authority and money, stressed service, self-sacrifice, truth and love, would not the Church be nearer to the life and teaching of Jesus, and more effective in helping to make a better world and in extending the Kingdom of God?

Auguste Sabatier in "THE RELIGIONS OF AUTHORITY AND THE RELIGION OF THE SPIRIT" says, "Christianity . . . in Protestantism was interiorised and became the very spirit of holiness, love and life" (p. 152).

7. What did Jesus regard as essential for salvation or for the good life?

Jesus did not appear to be very interested in authority. For him, was not God the final authority? If we may trust John's Gospel here, did not Jesus say, "What I say, therefore I say as the Father has bidden me" (Jn.12:49-50). Jesus decried men's authority. He says, "You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant" (Mark 10:42-44).

What he taught and lived was a way of life.

He was not particularly interested in who he was, or what people thought of him. Only once is it recorded that he asked, "Who do ye say that I am?" (Matthew 16:15, Mark 8:27, Luke 9:20). He says, "Why do you call me, Lord, Lord, and not do what I tell you?" (Luke 6:46).

Jesus was interested in daily life. The parable of

the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37), the picture of the Last Judgement (Matthew 25:31–45), the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14–30), most of the sermon on the mount (Matthew 5–7), and almost all Jesus' parables deal chiefly with a kind of life to be lived; it is a life of love to God and love to fellow men, as Jesus taught in Mark 12:30–31. It is a life of faith in God, as Jesus taught in Mark 11:22; It is a life of service, as Jesus taught when he said, "You will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:20), and when he said, "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant" (Mark 10:43). In the gospel according to John, Jesus speaks much about himself, but in the synoptic gospels he speaks of God and the Kingdom of God and little about himself.

The way of life that Jesus teaches and lives is a way of service and self-sacrifice (Luke 6:23). "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself". It is a way of joyfulness (the beatitudes, Matthew 5:1–10, tell who are the happy people.) The writer of John's gospel recognised this. Jesus says, "That my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (John 15:11).

His way of life is a way of love. "Love your enemies . . . If you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others?" (Matthew 5:44–47).

This way of life is centred in God and God's will. Jesus taught the good news about God (Mark 1:14); he told us to have faith in God (Mark 11:22); he told us to love God (Mark 12:30); he taught us to pray to God (Matthew 6:6, 9–13); he taught us to pray, "Thy will be done on earth" and he himself prayed, "Not what I will, but what thou wilt" (Mark 14:36). We are told of a number of times when he himself prayed to God (e.g., Mark 1:35). He wanted people to follow him in his way of life. So he says, "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord', shall enter the Kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21).

He knew that we are all sinners, and all need forgiveness. This is clearly recognised in the Lord's prayer. That prayer teaches us to expect forgiveness if we truly repent and have a forgiving spirit. The parable of the prodigal Son also teaches that God forgives, if we truly go back to God for forgiveness (Luke 15:11–24).

There is no need to claim that this forgiveness was made possible by Jesus' death on the cross. This claim was made by Paul (e.g. Romans 5:8–9) and has been taught by the Christian church. But did Jesus teach this in contradiction to the Lord's prayer and the parable of the Prodigal Son? Mark 10:45, "a ransom for many", can hardly be regarded as a genuine saying of Jesus (See "FORGIVENESS AND LIFE" by Dr.S. Angus, p. 50, and p. 79 and p. 105).

But the death and resurrection have a very real place in Christianity. The death of Jesus Christ is a great illustration of the kind of life Jesus always taught and lived – a life of self-sacrifice and service in love to God and men. As Nicholas Berdyaev says in "SPIRIT AND REALITY", "The crucifixion of the Divine Son was a response to human suffering and the evil of the world. . . In this world there is no apparent rational and moral uniformity of goal. There are instead irreconcilable good and evil, unjust suffering, the tragic destiny of great and just men" (p. 106).

The belief in man's Divine nature is common to all religions, although they have often given imperfect expression to this (p. 198).

We may believe in the spiritual resurrection of Jesus.

It is because the spirit of God, which dwelt in Jesus Christ, can dwell in you and me and in all men, that we find numbers of men and women living in the spirit of Jesus Christ. Jesus was unique; but so was Socrates, and so was Buddha, and so are you and I,

and every one of us.

The true story of Gaw Hong illustrates the glorious fact that the spirit of God can live in other men besides Jesus, as Jesus himself taught (Luke 11:13), and as Paul wrote, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you?" (1 Cor. 3:16).

Jesus is not the only man who has died a death of self-sacrifice and in love to God and fellow men.

Gaw Hong was a Chinese resident magistrate in charge of one of the districts on the island of Formosa. He was not a Christian but his sacrifice of himself wonderfully illustrates the verse, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

Gaw Hong lived in the 18th century and at a time when the Chinese, having driven away a Dutch Settlement which had been founded on the island of Formosa about 100 years before, were gradually taking possession of the most fertile land and forcing the native people towards the great, wild mountain ranges. The headhunters of Formosa ambushed and killed many Chinese. The Chinese retaliated.

Alone among the Chinese on the island Gaw Hong seemed to be able to live in peace and friendship with the natives.

Gaw Hong talked with the headhunters and on the score of their friendship and affection for him asked them to give up their headhunting and thus end the vendetta between the two peoples. After some discussion the natives said, "We are ready to help you, because you are good and just". They kept their promise and the Chinese could travel about without fear.

But when their big yearly religious festival was almost due, they wanted a head to offer to the Spirits according to their custom. At last they sent a deputation

to Gaw Hong. If no head was available, the natives feared there would be all kinds of trouble. After much discussion, at last Gaw Hong said, "I agree to what you say, I shall arrange that a man will pass a certain point in the forest on the day to be agreed upon. You may take his head for the festival".

At the appointed time the chief chosen to kill the man, hid among the bushes. He saw a man approaching, but his head was bent. When the man came near, the chief fired an arrow, and then jumped out, cut off the man's head and put it in his bag. When his companions gathered together, the bag was opened and the head of Gaw Hong was found. Bitterly did the natives reproach themselves. They vowed never to indulge in headhunting again. That vow was kept by the descendants of those tribesmen for more than 150 years. A temple still stands at Kagi, near the Arizan mountains, in memory of Gaw Hong. There is an inscription, "To give one's body to be killed is an act of perfect love". (The story of Gaw Hong can be read in "GALLANT GENTLEMAN" published by the National Sunday School Union about 23 years ago at 1/6d.)

Gaw Hong's death did not secure the forgiveness of the guilty natives. Gaw Hong's death illustrated the life of self-sacrifice and service that he always lived, and his death most powerfully changed their manner of life. Similarly Jesus' death does not secure God's forgiveness for us. Jesus' death illustrates the kind of life Jesus lived, a life of self-sacrifice, service and love to God and fellow men. His death on the cross has probably been the most powerful event in his life to induce men to follow him in his way of life. His life was centred in love to God and fellow men. He wanted our lives to be centred in love to God and fellow men. When men's sin brought him to crucifixion, he faced the injustice and the cruelty and the pain, feeling that this was God's will for him under the circumstances. And so he died, praying for the forgiveness of those who crucified him. Nicholas Berdyaev as we noted above, speaks of the unjust suffering of the crucified. But we do not believe

him when he says; "Unjust suffering proved to be an expiation of all human suffering" (p. 106). If that were true, was not Gaw Hong's suffering quite unnecessary?

The same conclusion can be drawn from the better known story told in "Miracle on the River Kwai" by Ernest Gordon, when the Argyle soldier confessed to a theft he did not commit, and was battered to death, saving by his action his eleven comrades (pp. 88, 89).

Suffering for others is part of the good life which Jesus taught us to live. Essential Christianity is not an intellectual assent to a credal statement. It is an act of will and commitment to a purpose to lead the kind of life Jesus taught us to lead. Jesus said, "Follow me". He did not ask men first for a credal statement. He assumed no authority but the authority of truth. The motive of his life was the Kingdom of God and the whole manner of his life was determined by love to God and fellow men. Is not essential Christianity a life lived in the spirit of Jesus Christ in love to God and fellowmen?

This paper was read by Ernest H. Vines at the Conference held by the Australia and New Zealand Theological Society, at St. Paul's College, Sydney, 13th August, 1969.

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