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The Issue in the Church

A Sermon Preached in the First Presbyterian Church of Princeton, December 30, 1923

Slightly Abridged

By the REV. J. GRESHAM MACHEN, D.D., Litt.D.

"Wherefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature: the old things are passed away; behold, they are become new" (II Cor. 5: 17).

THE world of today is hoping for something new. Things that seemed to be new have proved to be old; the newness of modern inventions has been found not to touch the depths of life. New situations, it has been discovered, do not make new men; a man is not made over by ascending in an airplane to the sky. Novelty has been sought in every sphere, but it is not so easy to find; rebellion against accepted forms does not produce a new style, but sometimes only reveals a pitiful lack of invention; sensationalism has proved to be rather dull.

In the epistles of Paul one finds that joyous freshness which modern men are seeking in vain; the first Christians evidently were in possession of something really new. The conditions of life, it is true, were not greatly changed; social institutions in the early church were left very much as they were before. But beneath outward sameness there was a mighty inner change. The novelty of the early church was very different from the novelty of 1923. Today we have changing circumstances and humanity itself in a rut; then there was outward sameness, but underneath it there were new men. "Wherefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature: the old things are passed away; behold, they are become new."

Many earnest men today are examining the future

with some dread. Is humanity condemned to a hopeless dullness, or may there be even now a fresh start? A fresh start is certainly not easy to achieve. It cannot be achieved simply by taking things as they come; it cannot be achieved simply by tearing off the last leaf for 1923 and putting a nice fresh calendar on the wall. The new year may prove to be old before his time. How shall 1924 be made really different from 1923; how shall the new year be made really new?

We have a startling suggestion to make. How would it be if there should be a revival of the Christian religion? At that point, no doubt—to use a figure of Mr. Sunday—many of our hearers will begin to snap their watches at us; if we have no more novel suggestion than that, we shall probably find our audiences dwindling away. But the suggestion is not really so hackneyed as it seems; amid the many elixirs that are on the market today, it is astonishing how little attention is being given to the gospel of Christ. Many modern men are like a contemporary British author of whom it has been said that he has sympathy for every religious institution on earth except one; he has the warmest sympathy for every pagan religion no matter how strange, but the Wednesday night prayer meeting he simply cannot stand. It was once remarked about a great encyclopedia how strange it was that the principle of that work, in accordance with which various types of religious belief were to be presented by their own adherents, was not applied to evangelical Christianity, at least in its consistent form. Other beliefs are pre-

sented in the great encyclopedia by their friends; evangelical Christianity alone (at least in the form of the Reformed Theology) is presented by its opponents. The same unfairness prevails in many circles today. Various religious beliefs are given a hearing, but this tolerance is not allowed to extend to the gospel of the cross of Christ. The discrimination may perhaps be excused by the incorrigibly insistent character of the gospel appeal, but it should not be excused on improper grounds. It should not be excused on the ground of breadth or tolerance. The prevailing attitude toward evangelical Christianity may be necessary in order to avoid trouble; it may be safe and prudent: but tolerant, at any rate, it certainly is not.

The prejudice against Christianity may ultimately become beneficial. It may be that when the Wednesday night prayer meeting becomes as strange as dervish dances it will be revived as a great new discovery to which the attention of men will turn. Already there is the most abysmal ignorance of the gospel; the Epistle to the Galatians, even among scholars, is almost as much a sealed book as it was just before Luther's day. Yet it is really so gloriously plain. When will it be rediscovered?

When it is rediscovered there will be great revival of the Christian religion. None can say how soon that will come, and certainly it will not be produced by human effort. It will come not by might and not by power, but by the Spirit of the Lord of Hosts. Yet although a revival of the Christian religion is not the product of human effort, there are certain favorable conditions which the Spirit may first produce and then use for the accomplishment of His beneficent work.

Those favorable conditions fall into two classes. First, there are those conditions which may be expected to appeal to all men, whether Christians or not, provided only they are really seeking some spiritual advance; in the second place, there are those conditions which will be appreciated by Christians alone.

Under the former head may be mentioned tolerance or religious liberty—the freedom of any citizens to hold, propagate, and teach to their children any form of religious belief

that they desire. Tolerance was a great achievement of our forefathers. But now, apparently, in America, it is being given up. It has been given up, for example, in Oregon, where a law soon to go into effect requires that all children up to sixteen years of age (until a certain grade has been reached) shall attend the public schools. Private schools and Christian schools are thus legislated out of existence, and children are taken forcibly from their parents and placed under the despotic control of whatever superintendent of education happens to be in office in the district where they reside. Similar legislation has been proposed in many other states, and the dangerous Towner-Sterling bill in Congress has as its ultimate tendency (whatever temporary safeguards there may be) the establishment of a uniformity of education which is the most appalling calamity into which any nation could fall. It would be difficult to imagine, at any rate, a worse tyranny than that of the Oregon type. Place children in their formative years under the despotic control of experts appointed by the state, and you have a really more effective interference with civil and religious liberty than the Inquisition, perhaps, ever achieved. It is true that hopeful signs are not al-

together absent. The abominable Lusk Laws in the State of New York, though by the scantiest majority, were repealed; and the decision written by Justice McReynolds, of the United States Supreme Court, concerning the Nebraska language law (which practically made literary education a crime) shows that the principles of American liberty are not yet entirely dead. But the danger is certainly very great. Unless there is tolerance on the part of the state, any great spiritual advance, whatever its direction may be thought to be, will be hindered. It will not, I suppose, be prevented. Men of real convictions now as always may perhaps maintain their convictions even under a hostile government. But why should the old battle for freedom be fought again? Why should we not retain the freedom which, at such great cost, our fathers won?

The second of the general conditions favorable to any spiritual advance is honesty — just plain old-fashioned honesty of speech. That condition in certain religious circles is largely absent today. Traditional terminology is constantly being used in a double sense. Plain people in the church are being told, for example, that this preacher or that believes that Jesus is God. They go away much impressed; the preacher, they say, believes in the deity of Christ; what more could be desired? What is not being told them is that the word "God" is being used in a pantheizing or Ritschlian sense, so that the assertion, "Jesus is God," is not the most Christian, but the least Christian thing that the modernist preacher says. The modernist preacher affirms the deity of Jesus not because he thinks high of Jesus but because he thinks desperately low of God.

Formerly when men had brought to their attention perfectly plain documents like the Apostles' Creed or the Westminster Confession or the New Testament, they either accepted them or else denied them. Now they no longer deny, but merely "interpret." Every generation, it is said, must interpret the Bible or the creed in its own way. But I sometimes wonder just how far this business of interpretation will go. I am, let us say, in a company of modern men. They

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to the pastorate of the new church, and upon his resignation to assume his present duties as general secretary of the Committees on Home and Foreign Missions of The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, his successor, Mr. Kellogg, was also unanimously elected. Under his ministry the church has continued its forward march with sharply increased membership and attendance.

The church has been greatly blessed in having a few very able leaders among the laity; it has also been blessed in having brought from the old church a large number of excellent Sunday school teachers, so that now the school has 200 members and an average attendance of about 130. The church has one of the largest and most active missionary societies in the denomination, a fine ladies' aid society, and two very active young people's organizations.

The present building is but the first of two contemplated by the congregation. It is expected that a church building will be joined to the present structure which will then be used solely for Sunday school purposes. In the meantime the present building has been completely furnished as a church auditorium on the main floor, with a lower floor which will be adequately furnished as a graded Sunday school.

The Issue in the Church

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begin to test my intelligence. And first they test me on the subject of mathematics. "What does six times nine make?" I am asked. I breathe a sigh of relief; many questions might place me very low in the scale of intelligence, but that question I think I can answer. I raise my hand hopefully. "I know that one," I say. "Six nines are fifty-four." But my complacency is short-lived. My modern examiner puts on a grave look. "Where have you been living?" he says. "Six nines are fifty-four"—that is the old answer to the question. In my ignorance I am somewhat surprised. "Why," I say, "everybody knows that. That stands in the multiplication table; do you not accept the multiplication table?" "Oh, yes," says my modern friend, "of course I accept the multiplication table. But then I do not take a static view of the multiplication table; every generation

must interpret the multiplication table in its own way. And so of course I accept the proposition that six nines are fifty-four, but I interpret that to mean that six nines are a hundred and twenty-eight." And then the examination gets into the sphere of history. The examiner asks me where the Declaration of Independence was adopted. That one, also, I think I know. "The Declaration of Independence," I say, "was adopted at Philadelphia." But again I meet with a swift rebuke. "That is the old answer to the question," I am told. "But," I say, "everyone knows that the Declaration of Independence was adopted at Philadelphia; that stands in all the history books; do you not accept what stands in the history books?" "Oh, yes," says my modern friend, "we accept everything that stands in the history books—hundred per cent Americans we are. But then, you see, we have to interpret the history books in our own way. And so of course we accept the proposition that the Declaration of Independence was adopted at Philadelphia, but we interpret that to mean that it was adopted at San Francisco." And then finally the examination turns (though still in the sphere of history) to the department of history that concerns the Christian religion. "What do you think happened," I am asked, "after Jesus was laid in that tomb near Jerusalem about nineteen hundred years ago?" To that question also I have a very definite answer. "I will tell you what I think happened," I say; "He was laid in the tomb, and then the third day He arose again from the dead." At this point the surprise of my modern friend reaches its height. The idea of a professor in a theological seminary actually believing that the body of a dead man really emerged from the grave! "Everyone," he tells me, "has abandoned that answer to the question long ago." "But," I say, "my friend, this is very serious; that answer stands in the Apostles' Creed as well as at the centre of the New Testament; do you not accept the Apostles' Creed?" "Oh, yes," says my modern friend, "of course I accept the Apostles' Creed; do we not say it every Sunday in church?—or, if we do not say it, we sing it—of course, I accept the Apostles' Creed. But then, do you not see, every generation has a right to interpret the creed in its own way. And so now of course we

accept the proposition that 'the third day He arose again from the dead,' but we interpret that to mean, 'The third day He did *not* rise again from the dead.'"

In view of this modern art of "interpretation," one may almost wonder whether the lofty human gift of speech has not become entirely useless. If everything that I say can be "interpreted" to mean its exact opposite, what is the use of saying anything at all? I do not know when the great revival of religion will come. But one thing is perfectly clear. When it does come, the whole elaborate art of "interpretation" will be brushed aside, and there will be a return, as there was at the Reformation of the sixteenth century, to plain common sense and common honesty.

Such are the general conditions of any great spiritual advance—the conditions which may be expected to appeal to friends and foes of Christianity alike. The latter condition, in particular, is not a matter that concerns merely specifically Christian ethics; outsiders can get the point as well as we. *The Freeman*, of New York, can hardly be accused of being a "fundamentalist" organ. Yet in the issue of December 9, I read the following very sensible words:

We can not help wondering why some of the clergy and laity who are being denounced by the "fundamentalists" should appear so anxious to parry the accusation of heresy which their opponents urge against them. Heretics they certainly are, whether the standard of judgment be a formal creed to which they have subscribed or the time-honoured views of Christian faith and practice with which they are assumed, quite justly, to be in agreement. Whatever else Christianity may or may not be, it is surely not a scheme of salvation by indirection and avoidance; why, then, try to dodge the issue? Men do not, apparently, very much hesitate to call themselves heretics in politics or education or literature or conventional morals; and a goodly number may be found who have broken openly with their old associations, and as openly gone about forming new ones; why not welcome the charge of heresy in religion and bear it as a mark of spiritual and intellectual courage, as it once was borne? There might be some martyrs, and martyrdom, we dare say, is disagreeable; but even that fate would be more honourable than the attempt to argue the words out of an instrument, or the seal off a bond.

To that in the main I can certainly subscribe. Only I do not believe that the martyrdom, which is the price of honesty, will be very serious. It must never be forgotten that in this issue

in the church we are dealing with purely voluntary organizations; and we are dealing (in the Presbyterian Church at least) with the requirements, not for church membership, but for the holding of office. No man is required to enter the ministry of the Presbyterian Church. If he is not in agreement with the faith for the propagation of which the church (in accordance with its constitution) plainly exists, he can enter into some other organization or form an organization of his own. And in doing so he will have the world very largely with him. There will be some obvious disadvantages, but they will be overbalanced by the advantage of honesty. The full personal respect, even of opponents, will be regained, and the whole discussion will be lifted to a loftier plane.

Tolerance on the part of the state, and its corollary, the right of individuals to associate themselves for the propagation of any creed which they may honestly hold, no matter how foolish it may seem to others—these are the general conditions of any spiritual advance.

But for a revival of the Christian religion, the Christian man knows that there are other and more specific conditions. With them we have now hardly time to deal. But it is hoped that every function of the church may serve in some sort to impress them on the worshippers' mind. One thing now needs to be said. In leaving the way open for a revival of the Christian religion we ought not to set up false antitheses; we ought not to say, as many are saying, that instead of controversy we favor prayer. As a matter of fact, what is needed is not prayer alone and not controversy alone, but prayer and controversy both—a controversy in which a Christian is impelled to engage when he rises from his knees. Indeed, in these days, true Christian prayer is quite impossible without bold witnessing for the truth. Never was it more abundantly plain that our Lord came not to bring peace, but a sword. It is quite useless to do what many are doing; it is quite useless to read the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians, while, at the same time, in the face of opposition we are ashamed of Christ. The plain fact is, disguised though it be by the use of traditional language, that two mutually exclusive religions are contending for the control of the Presbyterian Church.

Christmas

A CHRISTIAN book or a year's subscription to *The Presbyterian Guardian* makes an ideal Christmas gift that your friends will welcome. See the back page of this issue for a list of helpful suggestions.

One is the great redemptive religion known as Christianity; the other is the naturalistic or agnostic Modernism, essentially the same, I suppose, as the religion of the Positivists or of Professor Ellwood, which is opposed, not at one point, but at every point, to the Christian faith. A separation between the two is the crying need of the hour; that separation alone can bring true Christian unity. That does not mean that we are without sympathy for those who differ from us with regard to this great concern of the soul; on the contrary, many of us, in years of struggle, have faced only too clearly the possibility that we, too, might be forced to go with the current of the age and relinquish the Christian faith. We are certainly not without admiration for the many high qualities of that type of thought and life which the non-doctrinal religion of the present day, at its best, is able to show. But we are also not without admiration for Socrates and Plato; yet Christians they certainly were not. Christianity is a peculiar type of life which is founded upon a distinctive message; and where it loses its sense of its separateness it ceases to exist.

Christian prayer and Christian piety, we believe, are based only upon faithfulness to the Christian message and to Him who is the substance of it. We are grieved, therefore, when those who in the councils of the church have just (though we hope unwittingly) denied their Lord, think that they have made all well by reading the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians before the assembled church. The apostle who wrote that chapter would have been surprised indeed to discover that Christian love is being set in opposition to "the truth of the gospel." Very different is

the deeper love that is only a response to the love of God in the cross of Jesus Christ.

But it ought never to be forgotten that the author of any true revival is the Spirit of God. We ought to welcome certain conditions—we ought to welcome, I think, the controversy which has at least destroyed our complacency and turned our minds from trivialities to consider the foundations of our faith. We ought to carry on the controversy without thought of personal advantage and without the desire to get the better of an opponent in an argument. If we are animated by low motives, God will hardly honor our witness; but, on the other hand, He will not honor a witness that is false, no matter how high the motives of it may be. We certainly ought to carry on the controversy in love—love, even for those who are our opponents with regard to this great concern of the soul. We certainly cannot, it is true, without hypocrisy and unfaithfulness, pray *with* those who are adherents of a different religion from ours, whether they be in the visible church or outside of it; power does not come when we bow in the house of Rimmon. But though we cannot pray with our opponents, we certainly ought to pray *for* them with all our hearts. But it is all, in itself, without avail. God Himself must determine when the gospel will again be brought to light. And who can say how soon He will put forth His power to save? The gospel of the cross displays a wonderful power of recuperation. It seems sometimes to be buried forever, as in the religion of the Middle Ages, but then it bursts forth anew and sets the world aflame.

At present we are inarticulate; we know the riches of the gospel; we wonder at those who have it ready at hand and yet are content instead with the weak and beggarly elements. When will God raise up the man of His choice to give His message powerfully to the world? We cannot say. But the truth is not dead, and God has not deserted His church. Behind all the darkness and perplexity of the present time we can discern, on the basis of the promises of God, the dawn of a better day. There may come a time, sooner than we can tell, when again we can cry in the church, as every redeemed soul cries even now: "The old things are passed away; behold they are become new."