

Christianity as Related to Divine Love

John 1: 11, 12; John 10: 1-11; John 13: 1; John 20: 16, 17

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I had before me the thought of Christianity as related to the love of divine Persons.

It is a wonderfully blessed, though perhaps not a sufficiently appreciated fact, that the love of God has been expressed most blessedly by each Person of the Godhead. God Himself has expressed His own love to us in the Person of His Son; He also commends that love to us, a matter involving the death of Jesus. Then as we read the precious record of the movements of Christ in Manhood as seen in the gospels, we are brought face to face with the fact that Jesus loved. Again, divine love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, in order that we may not be spectators of this love merely, but that we might *know* the power and blessedness of it. The love of God has been *deluged* into our hearts; the word is that which is used to describe the flood in the book of Genesis.

But before proceeding with the thought of Christianity I would like to call attention to the word "Christian" itself. It is a word we often use, especially in this highly favoured land in which we live, but it is a word rarely used by the Spirit of God in the Scriptures. In the 11th chapter of Acts we have the comment of the Holy Spirit on this word; "the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch," (verse 26). They were "disciples," that is, they were followers of Christ. They had believed in Him; they had faith in Him; they had "turned unto the *Lord*", owning His rights over them. The evidences of God's grace in them gladdened the heart of Barnabas, as he perceived that the hand of the Lord was with them. He took account of them as being those whom he could exhort "that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord." Is it not a challenging matter to each one of us as we consider the characteristics of people who "were called Christians first"? Would not the prayerful consideration of these features lift the thought of Christianity out of all that is casual and nominal, and give us to see how vital a matter it is. Through infinite mercy we belong to Christ, redeemed by His precious blood; may it be evident to all that we are in very fact "Christ's ones."

Peter in his first Epistle introduces the word Christian in relation to a path of reproach and suffering for Christ's name sake. "If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the Spirit of Glory and of God resteth upon you . . . if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf." Both these thoughts are brought before us in Paul in the 26th chapter of Acts. He, truly, was one in whom the features of true and vital Christianity were seen; and in that chapter his testimony to Christ had brought him into suffering and reproach, into a pathway that ended, we believe, in the intense suffering of martyrdom. And yet as facing that issue, he could say, "I think (or, count) myself *happy*, king Agrippa."

We see from these passages what are the Scriptural features of a Christian. His faith is in a risen Christ; he has turned to the *Lord* and so acknowledges His rights over him; he finds his place in that which is of interest to the Lord Jesus here; he is marked by cleaving to the Lord, and he is prepared to suffer for Christ's sake.

If we, in our measure, are desirous of setting forth these precious characteristics, we need a power outside of ourselves, and so I am referring to Christianity as a sphere in which the preciousness and power of divine love can be known.

Now I believe that there is a very real danger of thinking that Christianity and Christendom are one and the same thing. Christendom as a profession is a conception of the *minds of men*; it is a system maintained in the power of the *will of man*; it eventuates in man daring to usurp God's place, and in relation to its responsible history the end will be that the Lord will are it out of His mouth (Rev. 3: 16). On the other hand, Christianity is a Divine conception; it springs from the heart of the blessed God; the power in which it is maintained is that of the Holy Spirit of God, whose normal function is to glorify Christ, He who is the centre of all the thoughts of God; and it eventuates in the formation of a vessel which, throughout the world-to-come and into eternity itself, will be morally worthy to bear the glory of God. As having been brought livingly into this realm we have our part in that wonderful vessel, the church. It is the complement of Christ, competent to share administration with Him in the Kingdom, and to be by His side as His bride, the object of His affections, throughout the eternal day. This is the blessedness of what God in wondrous love has brought us into!

In the epistle to the Ephesians we see the great thoughts of God presented and developed in this atmosphere of divine love, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath . . . chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him *in love*", Eph. 1: 3, 4. That is the eternal purpose of God; and Christ Himself as *loving* the church gave Himself for it "that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the Word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious church . . . holy and without blemish," Eph. 5: 25-27. Then the ministry functioning in the sphere of Christianity has in view the "increase of the body unto the edifying of itself *in love*; (or, its self-building up *in love*), Eph. 4: 16. Again, the apostle prays, "That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded *in love* may . . . know the *love of Christ*, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God," Eph. 3: 17-19. If Christ dwells in our hearts and Christ is the Centre of that wonderful sphere of love, then we must be in the very centre of love itself, and that is exactly where we are in Christianity.

Before the apostle proceeds to the exhortations which follow, including the word that we should "*walk in love*", Eph. 5: 2, he brings in a verse which links with the Scriptures we have read in John, "As the truth is in Jesus," Eph. 4: 21, and so far as I know that is the only reference to the life of Jesus here on earth which we find in the Ephesian epistle. All that of which the epistle speaks, the mercy of God; the grace of God, His kindness; His glory; the unsearchable riches of the Christ, and many other precious matters, would have been unknown to us had it not been for the coming into this world of the Lord Jesus Christ. The formation of what we know as Christianity awaited the coming of the Holy Spirit, as we see in Acts 2, but the moral features of it all were seen in the Person of Christ here in Manhood. He is the WORD; all these thoughts were in the heart of God eternally, and in Manhood Christ brought them into expression. It has been rightly said that moral nearness to God is the secret of the enjoyment of the fulness of His thoughts, and the Lord Jesus in coming into Manhood and accomplishing the will of God has drawn men to Himself, and in drawing men to Himself He has drawn them to the Father also. The blessedness of that which fills out the realm of Christianity can be known only in moral nearness to God.

Now Christ came into a world in which He already had interests. Perhaps we do not sufficiently realize what it must have been to the Lord Jesus to come to His own circle of interests and to be completely refused by His own people! (John 1: 11). but at that moment there came into view a new generation, "As many as received Him, to them gave He (the) right to be children of God," (New Trans.). And from that moment we see the attention of Christ focused on that new company. They are called His "own." Entrance into this new sphere was not by intelligence, nor was it by any ecclesiastical ceremony; it was as the result of receiving Christ, having faith in that blessed Person,

believing on His Name. Faith, given of God, operating thus towards Christ, gives to each one of us the right to take account of ourselves in the dignity that attaches to this wonderful company that Christ calls "His own."

If we trace the references to "His own" in John's gospel we see that Christ is constantly bringing the thought of His love to bear upon them. John 10 is filled out with the most beautiful allusions to the love of Christ. We see the movements of the Good Shepherd, the One who gives His life for the sheep, and He desires that the sweetness of that love might affect every individual sheep. "My sheep hear My voice;" the voice of infinite compassion for His own, and as hearing His voice the sheep follow Him. Christianity is characterized by persons moving in response to divine love expressed in all its power and blessedness in Christ.

He leads His sheep out — from Judaism in John 10 — but for us from everything contrary to Himself and the thoughts of His love. He leads them out that He might lead them in; He brings His sheep into the practical enjoyment of salvation and into the enjoyment of a pasture which He alone has access to. Psalm 23 is an allusion to one day in the life of care of a shepherd for his sheep, a day repeated every day in the love of Christ for His own.

"Having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end," John 13: 1. There is not one step of the pathway, save in selfwill, in which we cannot enjoy the present blessedness and power of the love of Christ.

In John 13 the Lord does not speak of going into death; He, of course, was going there, but He speaks of going to the Father. The great bent of the Lord's movement in that gospel is towards the Father, and He desires to lead His own there too. He loves us to that "end;" His precious love will wait upon us in every contingency and every difficulty; He will love us through the dark tunnel of circumstances, and He will bring us into the light of the Father's presence where glory shines unclouded in His blessed face. That is the "end" to which His love will lead us, to the very Source of love itself, and the sweetness of that love, in all its desires for us, is to be enjoyed now.

There are several references to the Lord as "Teacher" in John's Gospel, the first of which is in relation to the two disciples of John who followed Jesus. He asked "What seek ye"? And they answered, "Teacher (as the word is) where dwellest thou?" He invited them to "Come and see," to come into the very abode of love itself, the love which he had eternally enjoyed as in the Father's bosom. It is in the realm where love is known and enjoyed that we begin to appreciate the blessedness of the great truths of Christianity, and our hearts will be led more and more into the sweetness of the truth, "as the truth is in Jesus."

In John 20 we see in Mary one who had a deep appreciation of the love of Christ, and who was marked by affectionate response to Him. She appropriates Him to herself, saying "Rabboni," *my* Teacher, and that brings forth the precious word, "I ascend unto My Father, and your Father; and to My God, and your God." Here we have the outstanding blessedness of Christianity, the Christ of God leading us as in the enjoyment of His own personal love and as in attachment to Himself, into the very presence of His Father and His God; there to know and enjoy divine love in its own sphere, our hearts resounding in praise and worship to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.