

Is Albert Schweitzer a Christian?

ALEXANDER C. BRYANS

THE name of Dr. Albert Schweitzer is known around the world. He fills a place in the life of this day perhaps unparalleled by anyone. He is a medical doctor on the continent of Africa and has referred to himself as a jungle doctor. He has given himself to serve the people there, to lessen their suffering and make possible a better way of life for them. Before all this one might wonder why the question should be asked, "Is Albert Schweitzer a Christian?" This will become clear as the story unfolds.

On the fourteenth day of January this year he celebrated the eighty-sixth anniversary of his birth. He was born in Upper Alsace, the son of a village pastor. When he was five years old his father gave him music lessons on a piano that belonged to his grandfather. When he was eight years of age he began to play the pipe organ although his legs were hardly long enough to reach the pedals of the instrument. When he was nine he took the place of the organist in a Sunday service held in his father's church.

At eighteen he enrolled in Strasbourg University, where he studied theology and philosophy. He also spent much time in independent reading and research concerned with the gospels of the New Testament and the life of Jesus. Upon graduation he went to Paris to study and continued his work with the pipe organ under Widor. Completing his graduate work he obtained a position as a preacher in a church in Strasbourg. He began to write in the field of New Testament. Many of his books were of such stature that they may be found today in almost every theological library. Then he accepted a position on the theological faculty at the University of Strasbourg.

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By this time he appeared to be well established in his chosen field of endeavor for he was a New Testament scholar and concert organist at the age of thirty. However, he announced a decision that surprised his friends and disappointed his family. The decision had been made nine years before. Of this he wrote:

It struck me as incomprehensible that I should be allowed to lead such a happy life, while I saw so many people around me wrestling with care and suffering. . . . Then one brilliant morning there came to me, as I awoke, the thought that I must not accept this happiness as a matter of course, but must give something in return for it. Proceeding to think the matter out at once with calm deliberation, while the birds were singing outside, I settled with myself before I got up that I would consider myself justified in living till I was thirty for science and art, in order to devote myself from that time forward to the direct service of mankind . . . however inconspicuous the sphere of it.¹

This he did, although "my relatives and friends all joined in expostulating with me on the folly of my enterprise. I was a man, they said, who was burying the talent entrusted to him and wanted to trade with false currency." He enrolled in medical school to prepare to go to Equatorial Africa as a doctor. In time he went opening a hospital under the most primitive conditions. Now his name is known around the world. When the twentieth century reached the mid-way point he was named "the man of the half century."

Since that time, in 1952, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and went to Norway to receive it. His visit there became the occasion of a violent controversy in that country among theologians and members of the clergy. Articles were

¹ Schweitzer, *Out Of My Life and Thought*, p. 70.

published, stories were carried in the daily press, stating the opinion of many church leaders that he should not be called a Christian. However, a prominent Bishop, noted for his liberal views, wrote:

Albert Schweitzer a Christian? I feel it is presumptuous, and a disgrace to the Christian Church, that it has ever been possible to raise this question, and that even from certain quarters it has been answered in the negative.

An admirer of Dr. Schweitzer, Dr. Gabriel Langfeldt, a well-known Norwegian psychiatrist at Oslo University, wrote and published a book² in which he made a study of the matter. This book was made available in English in this country only late last year.

Why was such a question raised concerning Dr. Schweitzer? Actually there is some reason for this, because in the field of doctrine he is not at all orthodox in his religious thinking. Let us see where he stands on some doctrinal matters and then decide what should be done with the question. Dr. Langfeldt submitted the material for his book to Dr. Schweitzer and he in turn replied that he felt this was in capable hands.

First of all, he does not think of God as a person. God to him is the mysterious force, the life force, the primal life force that manifests itself in all that lives. God to him is not something outside this world or beyond the realm of being but resident within being, expressed in a will-to-live on the part of all creatures. God is the universal Will-To-Live, the life force in and through all creation.

It follows that prayer for him is not an attempt to speak to God as people might speak to each other. Rather, prayer is meditation and a move to relate oneself more fully to this God. Prayer means a surrender of the self. Prayer is very important to Dr. Schweitzer and, by

his own admission, is a constant source of renewal and help in carrying the burdens of the day. Worship is important to him and he conducts services of worship for his hospital staff. He wrote in his autobiography:

The church services which I attended as a child gave me a feeling for solemnity and a need of quiet to collect my thoughts. . . . I cannot agree with those who will not let children attend the services of grown-ups before they understand them. Whether one understands or not is not the decisive factor; what matters is to have the experience of solemnity.

He finds in Jesus the great inspiration of his life, the model and example of what human life should be. He does not accept the doctrine of the virgin birth of Jesus, or the doctrine of his physical resurrection. He does not believe that Jesus died for the sins of men but because of the sins of men. Jesus lived to show men how to live. Schweitzer does not accept what he believes to be theories concerning Jesus set forth in the doctrines of the church.

Jesus talked about a Kingdom of God. To Schweitzer this is a kingdom of love and Jesus stands as a symbol of the gospel of love. He wrote, "We serve Christianity better by strongly devoting ourselves to Jesus' religion of love than by bending the knee to dogma." To him Jesus is a unique, spiritually and ethically strong personality who serves as an example for us.

The one important thing is that we shall be as thoroughly dominated by the idea of the Kingdom as Jesus required his followers to be. . . . The historical Jesus moves us deeply by His subordination to God. In this He stands out as greater than the Christ personality of dogma.³

In the area of ethics we find the phrase that is a key to his philosophy, "reverence for life." If God is the primal life force in all living creatures, reverence for that life, which is a man-

² Langfeldt, *Albert Schweitzer: A Study of His Philosophy of Life*. New York: George Braziller, 1960.

³ Schweitzer, *Out Of My Life and Thought*, pp. 46-49.

ifestation of God, follows. The ethical person will act in accordance with the principle of reciprocity—treating others as he would want them to treat him.

We must not cause suffering to any animate being, even the lowest (unless we ourselves are having to obey the principle of necessary self-defense) and, as far as we are able, shall be active to benefit other beings through positive action. . . . I am life that wills to live, in the midst of life which wills to live.⁴

Ethics to him is a matter of responsibility to all that has life. He places religion and ethics so close together that one can hardly draw a line between them, for to live with God is to promote this kind of responsible action on the earth.

Now is the time to ask the question, Is Albert Schweitzer a Christian? Obviously he is not orthodox in his religious views. We can understand why the controversy arose in Norway on the occasion of his visit there for he had set aside the historic doctrines and creeds of the church. Dr. Langfelt summarizes an answer this way:

From the theological - philosophical points of view, there is little point in calling Albert Schweitzer a Christian. He has been powerfully influenced by Buddha. . . . He has been unable to subscribe to any religion; he belongs to no confession whatever. If, therefore, by Christian is meant a person who stands firmly by the Christian creed, then it is obvious that Albert Schweitzer cannot be called a Christian.⁵

However, Dr. Langfelt goes on to say:

To describe him as a Christian because Jesus has been the great and most important example and because he has tried to practice Jesus' gospel of love in his work, would be justified if one means thereby that he is a typical and outstanding representative of the Christians of today . . . Schweitzer's religion consists in performing acts of love towards all his fellow-creatures.⁶

Soon after the earthly ministry of Jesus came to a close men began to ask

some questions about him. Who was he? What was the meaning of his life and death for the world? Out of this came "the Christ of theology," set forth in the creeds and doctrines of the church—doctrines concerning his birth, his death, his resurrection, his relationship to God. Indeed, this same interest produced the New Testament. One of the historic creeds is the Nicene Creed that appeared in the year 325 A.D. It says in part:

We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made . . . by whom all things were made.

One wonders if Jesus of Nazareth who lived briefly and spoke simply would recognize himself in the Nicene Creed. Surely not.

It would be fair to say that one must make a choice at this point. If one's interest lies in the field of doctrine, dogma, and creed, the field in which the church fathers and church councils spoke, wrote, and debated, then let him define as a Christian a person who stays within this framework. But if one's interest lies in the direction of making contact with Jesus as a person who lived and walked on this earth, the way is open to include in the Christian fellowship those who endeavor to walk his way, share his spirit, and live in submission to the will of God as Jesus did. Let a choice be made, but let the issue be clearly seen.

Dr. Ernest Fremont Tittle, who until his death twelve years ago was minister at the First Methodist Church in Evanston, Illinois, published a chapter entitled, "What It Means To Be a Christian." He spoke in strong terms, pointing to a shift in the course of history from Christianity as a "way of life" to be found in Jesus, to Christianity as a "body of belief." He said that because of this the name of Christian has been refused to many.

It has been refused to men who possessed to a truly remarkable degree the spirit of Christ, but who could not accept certain theological dogmas, and applied to men who did not pos-

⁴ Langfeldt, *Albert Schweitzer*, pp. 74-87.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 114f.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 115, 119.

sess in any notable degree the spirit of Christ, but who could and did subscribe to the official creeds of the church. . . . There is an inherent weakness in any attempt to identify Christianity with any creedal statement of it, to identify Christianity with the orthodoxies of yesterday.⁷

Is Albert Schweitzer a Christian? This depends upon a definition of the term. This can be said however, whatever the man may or may not be called Albert Schweitzer is still Albert Schweitzer, and

⁷ Tittle, *The Religion of the Spirit*, pp. 172-3.

for many that is enough to know. Dr. Schweitzer closed his book, **The Quest of the Historical Jesus**, with these words:

As one unknown and nameless He comes to us, just as on the shore of the lake He approached those men who knew not who He was. His words are the same: "Follow thou Me!" and He puts us to the tasks which He has to carry out in our age. He commands. And to those who obey, be they wise or simple, He will reveal Himself through all that they are privileged to experience in His fellowship of peace and activity, of struggle and suffering, till they come to know, as an inexpressible secret, Who He is . . .

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