

The Minimum of Doctrine

Dr. Percy Gardner's volume, *Exploratio Evangelica*,* explains his idea of the basis and origin of Christianity. He is reverent, reluctant to disturb current beliefs and eager to upbuild Christian faith and character, but he has abandoned many doctrines hitherto considered fundamental. The result is to show how little of doctrine can be believed by one still claiming to be loyal to Christ and to the church. The book is elaborate, acutely critical, and, although many of its claims are not to be conceded, no one will deny the author's ability, in spite of some inconsistencies, or the propriety of his temper. That he is a destructive critic so largely he regrets, as he admits often.

His fundamental position seems to be that the burden of the support of Christian doctrine is transferred from history to psychology, from the external to the internal. He attaches vital importance to experience. The doctrines of the gospel are not founded upon history, but are rather its outgrowth. They cannot be proved by reasoning, but are perceptive views immediately based upon the sensations and facts of the spiritual life. As for the Christian documents, reverent criticism must be allowed free course. About the teaching of Jesus we are well informed, although critical

progress has not enabled us . . . to set forth the purposes and character of our Master in an objective light as a part of ascertained history. . . . We must content ourselves with mere probability in place of the old fancied certainty, when we quote words as spoken by him or deeds as done by him [p. 170].

But if his commands were to be carried out literally, all civil government, military organization and industrial problems would come to an end. Either he wholly lacked practical wisdom, or his commands were meant to be regarded as expressions of a tendency. If they were to be taken literally, they can be illustrated by only a small ascetic society in the midst of a hostile world.

Coming to particular doctrines, Mr. Gardner claims that the fall is disbelieved by all educated persons; that the Trinity is credible only experientially, God being revealed (1) in the order and law of the visible and intellectual worlds; (2) in the life and work of Jesus Christ, both on earth and in heaven, and in ideal humanity; and (3) directly to the human heart by graces and inspiration. As for the incarnation, historic probability points to Nazareth rather than Bethlehem as our Lord's birthplace, and the miraculous birth cannot be accepted without concessions which any discriminating scholar would repudiate in secular history. Yet we cannot entirely give up the incarnation without great spiritual loss, or without injustice to the history of Christianity. Between these extremes he says many ways have been and may be taken. Which one he takes himself is left obscure. Apparently he does not abandon the doctrine, although he does not hold its traditional form.

As to the atonement, he admits the historic truth of Christ's death for the world, into which he brought a new life which enabled society to survive the inner corruption and the outward shocks which threatened the Roman empire. But the affirmation of the atonement goes far beyond history into the realm of ideas.

Jesus had not long left the world, when St. Paul, in his own language, was buried with Christ and rose again with him into newness of life. And from that day to this the experience has been daily and hourly repeated in the Christian church [p. 405].

The atonement is a work which began in Christ's life,

culminated in his death and has continually been repeated all through the ages. And belief in that atonement is a process: the process whereby, in reliance on the divine grace and by the aid of Christ, a man dies to self, to the base, to the material, and begins to live to the spiritual and to God. It does not seem to be of the greatest importance, from this point of view, with what intellectual form a man clothes for himself the eternal facts [p. 406].

The hope of immortality is based upon experience of this life. The writers of the Scripture had no superhuman knowledge or virtue. Who they were and when they wrote must remain doubtful in many cases. Their books were given by God to the early Christians and for ages served to maintain faith and piety. Yet the course of history can only be accounted for by a divine inspiration of the Founder and his disciples, which has lasted to our times.

In miracles the author disbelieves. In the alleged descent of Christ into Hades he sees an adaptation of belief of the pagan mythologists known as Orphists, from whom also he thinks comes most of the imagery in which the future world was presented to the early Christian imagination.

These statements reveal Dr. Gardner's divergence from the beliefs of the Christian Church, and how much more radical his position is than that of most of the members of even the advanced school of criticism. His book is striking in three respects. It is a good example of criticism which, although destructive, is nevertheless reverent; it insists upon the vital importance of personal knowledge of God, obedience to him and the cultivation of holiness as the fundamental virtue of Christian character; and it is repeatedly shown how the great truths of the gospel, when driven out of the head, find their way back into his belief through the heart.