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CHRIST AND THE TIME SPIRIT.

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It is recorded in the opening verses of the sixteenth chapter of Matthew, that when the Pharisees and Sadducees demanded a sign from Christ as a proof of his divine mission, our Lord replied, "A wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given unto it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas." His enemies knew that Christ would refuse a sign, and hoped that his refusal would be taken by the common people as a tacit confession that he could not give it, hence would lead to his rejection. The demand for a sign was a question of a wicked and adulterous generation, a manifestation of the time spirit. The time spirit attached abnormal importance to signs and wonders as evidence of divine revelation. A refusal to gratify this unspiritual curiosity would be regarded as a confession of inability to account for his claims as Messiah.

The time spirit — the Germans call it the *Zeitgeist* — is the medium of thought through which Christianity is transmitted in a given age. As light partakes of the nature of the atmosphere through which it passes, so does the conception of Christianity depend somewhat upon the medium of thought which transmits it; and since this thought medium is a product of the life of the age, the time spirit is really the judgment of the age upon itself. In this case it was a wicked and adulterous generation seeking after a sign.

The spirit of our own time differs in one important particular from this. There is nothing of brutal rejection of Christ in it. Christ is admired and revered; Christian institutions are

DOUBTERS, AND HOW TO DEAL WITH THEM.

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WITHOUT a great deal of exaggeration, the same remark might be made concerning doubters that David once made, in his haste, concerning liars; but just as a lack of veracity does not always thrust itself upon our attention, so we hear but little of the swarms of doubts that becloud the mind of the average hearer. Nevertheless, the pastor, as he confronts his congregation on the Sabbath, may be reasonably sure that, with rare exceptions, his message will be robbed of much of its force by reason of the fact that it is met at the threshold by an army of doubts which never come into the open and declare themselves. It is like shooting at an object in deep water: the marksman is apt to mistake its true position, because of refraction, and even when his aim is true, the force of the shot is destroyed by the resistance of the water so that it fails to do any execution. It would startle the preacher, if he could look into the hearts of his hearers, and see how many have grave doubts as to things fundamental; without a deep and abiding conviction even of the existence of God, a future life, and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But it is not with this class of doubters that we have to do at this time. The question before us is how to deal with those whose doubts are opened and avowed, who do not hesitate to declare their lack of assent to established beliefs, or even their positive disbelief.

While by no means a logical division, it will suit our purpose to speak of these under three classes:

1. There are those whose avowed difficulties are only symptoms of a far more serious trouble. Not unfrequently one will point to some particular doctrine, such as the sovereignty of God, or election, or the apparent contradictions of Scripture,

or the teachings of science, or the inconsistencies of professing Christians, as a valid reason for not obeying the gospel. The pastor flatters himself that the difficulty can be easily met, but often finds, to his dismay, that his arguments are powerless to convince, or else the removal of that particular difficulty only reveals the presence of another, and so on indefinitely. The real trouble lies far deeper. Ofttimes the man is in doubt as to the reality of religion, the future life, or even the very existence of God. He does not intimate the existence of these doubts, and perhaps scarcely recognizes them himself, even while his soul is paralyzed by them. Or else, while admitting all these things, the enmity of the natural heart prompts him to seek some way of escape from the much dreaded duty of repentance. This class we believe to be far larger than is generally supposed, and many a man would be surprised to find himself so classed.

What is to be done in such a case? The wise physician is not greatly concerned to remove symptoms merely, but seeks to strike at the hidden source. With an opiate he might relieve the pain, but the question is, What does that pain mean? So, it is a waste of time and strength for the physician of souls to deal directly with doubts which, after all, are only symptoms. The wise pastor will seek to reach the real root of the trouble; point out the real significance of these difficulties; induce a realizing sense of God; make him feel the powers of the world to come; stir the conscience, and get the heart right.

The first difficulty that presents itself in such a case is the question of diagnosis. Is this a real difficulty, or simply a symptom? Perhaps one of the surest indications that it is only a symptom is the failure of the individual, even measurably, to live up to what he does profess to believe. When, for instance, one neglects even the plainest duties, because, as he alleges, he does not understand the doctrine of election, or shows himself unconcerned about unpardoned sins, because, forsooth, he has never been able to determine exactly the nature of the unpardonable sin, no better evidence is needed that the real trouble is an unregenerate heart and an unwillingness to obey the truth.

2. There are those whose doubts and difficulties arise from a disordered physical condition. The physician has to take account of the influence of the mind upon the body, and the pastor in like manner must not lose sight of the influence of

the body upon the mind. A torpid liver is responsible for many a torturing doubt, and a dose of calomel will do more to dispel these doubts than the wisest pastoral counsel. The average man fails to distinguish between his stomach and his soul, as the seat of the trouble, and too often the zealous pastor makes the same mistake. There are conditions of the body when spiritual peace is out of the question. The writer has a vivid recollection of his first experience with a case of this kind. A young lady, under deep conviction of sin, and in great spiritual distress, came to him for help and counsel. After three prolonged interviews, which failed to bring relief, and as the result of which the darkness seemed only to become more dense, the true source of the difficulty was at last discovered. It was a genuine work of grace in the first instance; but so deeply had her soul been stirred by spiritual conflict, that, according to her own statement, she had scarcely been able to eat or sleep for ten days, and when at last she came to her pastor for help, physical exhaustion had rendered her mind morbid and utterly incapable of seeing anything in its true light. The uselessness of further counsel was at once apparent, and she was turned over into the hands of her physician. When, on the following Sabbath, she entered the house of God, the joy and gladness in her face rendered it useless to ask about those torturing doubts, which had gone like some hideous dream of the night.

It is very noticeable that while some diseases, like consumption, for example, are often attended with spiritual elation, there are others which almost invariably produce spiritual depression. It is a rare thing to find a man who fears that he has committed the unpardonable sin, but quite the reverse with the other sex, and in the great majority of cases it can be traced directly to some female disease. So, too, diseases like softening of the brain are almost sure to be accompanied by spiritual depression in some form, and few things are more trying to the sympathetic pastor than the piteous appeals from these suffering ones for spiritual help which it is impossible for him to give. The pastor cannot, of course, be expected to acquaint himself with medical science, but it is important for him to grasp the fact that many doubts and difficulties have their origin in physical conditions, and to attempt to reach them by spiritual means is not only to fail, but oftentimes means an aggravation of the trouble.

3. There are those whose doubts have their origin in the intellect. They are sincere seekers after the truth, but by reason of imperfect knowledge of the facts in the case, or defective reasoning, they find themselves unable to accept those views which are generally regarded as being orthodox. Under present conditions this class must necessarily be a large one. It is pre-eminently a skeptical age, in the good sense of that term, as well as the bad. Amid the astonishing advance of science, and the intellectual activity of the time, nothing escapes scrutiny; and the literature of the present day is eminently calculated to raise doubts in the mind, even where they do not arise as the natural result of attempting to adjust apparently discordant truths, in one's own thinking. Touching this class, we venture to make the following practical suggestions:

(a) The pastor should show a spirit of sympathy with the doubter. The doubt may be a baseless one, but the doubter, if he is an honest one, is not to be laughed at on the one hand or denounced on the other. The pastor himself, if he will but own it, has doubts of his own, not indeed upon that particular point perhaps, but upon some other, far more serious, it may be, and why should he produce the impression that doubt is an indication of either mental weakness or moral obliquity? Let him bear in mind that an honest doubt is a mark of spiritual as well as intellectual life, and that the man who is cock-sure of everything is dead.

(b) Let the pastor make an honest effort to remove the difficulty as far as possible. To this end it is important for him to get the exact stand-point of the objector. This is all the more important for the reason that the objector is often unable to state his case clearly as it lies in his own mind, and so fails to be understood. In order to meet many of these objections, it is essential that the pastor should have some knowledge of the subjects involved. He cannot be expected to be an expert in questions raised by the Higher Criticism, nor to be able to deliver an *ex cathedra* opinion upon questions of science, but he must have some acquaintance with all these subjects in their relation to religion. The pilot need not know where all the rocks and quicksands are, but he must at least know where a safe channel is to be found. The very worse thing he can possibly do is to denounce all such objections as infidel and wicked.

Let him invite the doubter to unite with him in studying the question, and let him beware of acting the part of a partisan advocate, whose only object is, by hook or crook, to get a favorable verdict. A debate is generally to be avoided, as in such a case victory or defeat are alike fatal.

(c) There is always the danger of unduly magnifying the importance of a doubt, and of attaching to it a significance which it does not deserve. When the spots on the sun were first accurately measured and described, so enormous was their magnitude that the impression was produced that there was but little there but spots, and that the king of day had been shorn of his glory; but we have found that, after all, they are but spots, and that the end of that glorious orb is not yet. So when doubt arises as to some particular point, we give it so much thought, and are so much impressed by it, that we are apt to lose sight of the things we do believe, and come to the conclusion that there is nothing settled. It is well at such times to turn the attention from these negative unbeliefs to our positive beliefs, and it will be both a surprise and a relief to find that, after all, the things which we believe and are sure of far outweigh those which are doubtful.

In dealing with the doubter, it should, furthermore, be remembered that it is practically impossible to arrive at perfect certainty in all things, and there is always a residuum of doubt which defies all attempts to remove it. Sometimes it takes one form, and sometimes another, determined in a measure by the idiosyncrasies of the individual.

When a doubt refuses to yield to treatment, just let it alone, and more than likely it will disappear of itself. Many a malady has defied the skill of the physician to remove it, and then, when let alone, nature has done the work effectually. Let the pastor, when the local treatment has apparently failed, drop it, and devote his energies to the work of building up the spiritual system of his patient, and then, spiritual health returns, and the man grows in the grace that is in Christ Jesus, the doubt will disappear like the morning cloud before the rising sun.