

ARE CHRISTIANS HYPOCRITES?

[Written for THE COURIER.]

The Rev. Dr. McDonald, of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the Ascension, New York, made the following statement in a sermon delivered a few years ago:

"There is a belief prevalent that the clergymen of to-day are not honest; that they believe things they dare not preach, and that they preach what they do not believe and what they feel certain in their own minds is not true."

There is, unfortunately for the Christian religion, such a belief prevalent. No one can deny it. And as the regularly ordained ministers of the gospel do but expound the doctrines of their several denominations, subscribed to by the members of the different congregations, is it not apparent then, granting the insincerity of ministerial teaching, that church members themselves are liable to the same charge of professing that which they do not believe? And are not both charges well founded? Is it not a fact that modern Christians can be justly accused of hypocrisy?

The Nineteenth century professor of the Christian religion finds himself shackled with the chimerical philosophy of the dark ages. Against his will against the mandate of that inner consciousness which asserts itself in every human being, he is made to accept the vagaries which emanated from the age of sophistry and mysticism. His enlightened understanding is allowed no opportunity for shaping his own religious convictions. As long as he is in the church he must perform bow in humble submission to the decrees of ancient monks and priests who delighted in making Christ's religion a stumbling block in the way of the earnest seeker after truth. The Reformation did indeed remove from the church some of the ill conceived dogmas originated in the preceding centuries; but many barriers were left untouched. The curtain of progress and truth was but partly lifted, and God's pure sunlight was permitted to suffuse but a portion of the dark recesses and byways of the gloomy past. And even with the sundering of old traditions and heresies came now obstacles in the path of the humble follower of Christ. Calvin and Luther, with others, fought and conquered the pestering dragons of fanaticism only to add new burdens to the church they rescued. Before Luther, before Calvin, before Savonarola, before Erasmus, thinking men wrestled with their consciences over the encumbrances of the Christian faith, and in their inmost hearts, rejected the false for the true, turned aside the base covering to pluck the hidden kernel of truth. But those were dangerous times. Men questioned religious teachings at their peril. While inwardly protesting they were compelled to accept what was offered in silence. A man's liberty or life was the penalty of disbelief in the empirical theology of the day. Thus were men and women forced by canting priests, backed by the awful power of inquisition, to profess belief in creeds and articles of faith which their own understanding could not endorse, and a large number of the followers of the disciple of truth were made unwilling hypocrites.

True the Reformation affected a change. Its influence was clarifying, and men were left free, within certain specified limits, to express themselves in accordance with their personal convictions; but since that time theology has been practically at a standstill. The teachings of the principal actors in the great upheaval were accepted almost as inspired precepts from heaven, and these, with so much of the foundation of the mediæval church as was left undisturbed, have constituted and do constitute the theological foundation of the new church. In the intervening years the superstructure has developed and enlarged, but the bases, zealously guarded by scholastic divines, have not been touched. The modern structure is upheld by decayed foundations planted in ignorance and superstition centuries ago. Knowing the habitation to be insecure, Christians have been compelled to live on in silence. To-day the mother church and her lusty offspring are all guilty of hypocrisy.

Study the conditions of salvation offered by the different denominational divisions of the church. There was a time, now long past, when men were told; "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved." Now man's diabolical ingenuity has interposed new obstructions in the way of a direct path to the presence of the Almighty, and in addition to faith and an endeavor to comply with Christ's precepts, and to follow his example, we are compelled to

accept and express faith in the variegated theological doctrines of purely human origin. According to the immutable decree of the church, manifested in its different branches, we can reach the goal of salvation only through the rocks and shoals of baptism, holy water predestination, absolution etc. We do not believe all this; but we must submit if our names are to be enrolled among the army of the saved. That we do not believe in these things is evident by the spirit of dissent which is now beginning to manifest itself so prominently throughout the length and breadth of the land. The ministers themselves do not believe in them any more than do the rank and file of the church, as is witnessed by the fact that the doctrinal discourses of one-hundred years ago are seldom heard in the modern pulpit. To-day the Presbyterian minister, in the face of widespread disapproval of the central facts of Calvinistic theology, is loth to preach on the doctrine of predestination or election. It is not so many years since faithful church-goers expected and demanded learned theological harangues on some one or other of the dogmatic hypotheses which have for so many years been looked upon as the fundamental principles of the Christian religion. Religion was not a simple, loving faith, and sermons on the simple story of Christ's saving grace were not regarded with favor by a people steeped in what they called "orthodoxy." The horrors of a raging hell, the awful punishments in store for the unbeliever, the importance of the observance of the forms and ceremonies of the church, the elaboration of the niceties of theological teaching, all these possessed far more interest for the attendant upon divine worship than the relation of the Saviour's sacrifice for the salvation of the world and the accompanying appeal for a more Christ like life. Instead of discourses pointing out the lessons to be drawn from the Saviour's blameless life and urging men to emulate Him, to study His character, dreary essays on harsh and ungodlike theories, originally promulgated by pharisaical ecclesiastical dignitaries, seemed to be most in demand.

But today, while the standards of the respective churches retain, to a considerable extent, the old-time doctrines and creeds, ministers are not given to enlarging upon them. At stated intervals Baptist ministers and Methodist ministers and Presbyterian ministers do instruct their hearers in the special beliefs of their several churches; but they prefer generally to give such subjects a wide berth. For the undercurrent of popular disapproval of the monkish vagaries and philosophical speculation foisted on religion, slowly gathering in force and power for hundreds of years, has at last assumed a threatening aspect. The pent-up feeling of the mass of professing Christians is already beginning to express itself in no uncertain way, and the ministers knowing this, dare not, if they so desired, offend the growing sentiment of the people by the old form of pulpit instruction.

Evidences of this as yet not adequately expressed disbelief in the array of forms and creeds and doctrines and observances which have so long stifled the church are not wanting. The widespread dissension in the various denominations betokens in unmistakable terms a universal protest against the old standards. At home and abroad the spirit of discord is stalking forth. In every religious sect trouble over doctrinal points is brewing. There is a slashing and crashing of creeds. At no time since the Reformation has there been such a decided and general objection to the ancient teachings of the church.

When the sum of one million dollars is presented to a university accompanied by the following statement, does it not seem that decided exception is taken to the old system of doctrinal teaching?

"It is my earnest wish that at proper times and in a proper manner, I would suggest at least once a week, the attention of the students, at all stages of their course, may be called to the teaching of our Saviour, as recorded in the gospels, as distinguished from the interpretations of these teachings by men, as embodied in creeds, catechisms, articles of faith and denominational dogmas."

Couched in such language the above really amounts to a proviso. James B. Colgate used these words in notifying the trustees of Colgate University, of Hamilton, New York, of his gift of one million dollars to the institution. When Dr. Briggs, of the Presbyterian church, by the advocacy of liberal ideas which a few years since