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Primitive Christianity

Theodore Parker

West Roxbury Unitarian Church

Paul Royster (annotator)

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, proyster@unl.edu

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PRIMITIVE CHRISTIANITY

THERE are some ages when all seem to look for a great man to come up at God's call, and deliver them from the evils they groan under. Then Humanity seems to lie with its forehead in the dust, calling on Heaven to send a man to save it. There are times when the powers of the race, though working with their wonted activity, appear so misdirected, that little permanent good comes from the efforts of the gifted; times when governments have little regard for the welfare of the subject, when popular forms of Religion have lost their hold on the minds of the thoughtful, and the consecrated augurs, while performing the accustomed rites, dare not look one another in the face, lest they laugh in public, and disturb the reverence of the people, their own having gone long before. Times there are, when the popular Religion does not satisfy the hunger and thirst of the people themselves. Then mental energy seems of little value, save to disclose and chronicle the sadness of the times. No great works of deep and wide utility are then undertaken for existing or future generations. Original works of art are not sculptured out of new thought. Men fall back on the achievements of their fathers; imitate and reproduce them, but take no steps in any direction into the untrodden infinite. Though Wealth and Selfishness pile up their marble and mortar as never before, yet the chisel, the pencil, and the pen, are prostituted to imitation. The artist does not travel beyond the actual. At such times, the rich are wealthy, only

to be luxurious and dissolve the mind in the lusts of the flesh. The cultivated have skill and taste, only to mock, openly or in secret, at the forms of religion and its substance also; to devise new pleasures for themselves; pursue the study of some abortive science, some costly game, or dazzling art. When the people suffer for water and bread, the king digs fish-pools, that his parasites may fare on lampreys of unnatural size. Then the Poor are trodden down into the dust. The Weak bear the burden of the strong, and they, who do all the work of the world, who spin, and weave, and delve, and drudge, who build the palace, and supply the feast, are the only men that go hungry and bare, live uncared for, and when they die, are huddled into the dirt, with none to say GOD BLESS YOU. Such periods have occurred several times in the world's history.

At these times man stands in frightful contrast with nature. He is dissatisfied, ill-fed, and poorly clad; while all nature through, there is not an animal, from the Mite to the Mammoth, but his wants are met and his peace secured by the great Author of all. Man knows not whom to trust, while the little creature that lives its brief moment in the dew-drop, which hangs on the violet's petal, enjoys perfect tranquillity so long as its little life runs on. Man is in doubt, distress, perpetual trouble; afraid to go forward, lest he go wrong; fearful of standing still, lest he fall; while the meanest worm, that crawls under his feet, is all and enjoys all its nature allows, and the stars over head go smoothly as ever on their way.

At such times, men call for a great man, who can put himself at the head of their race, and lead them on, free from their troubles. There is a feeling in the heart of us all, that as Sin came by man, and Death by Sin, so by man, under Providence, must come also Salvation from that Sin, and Resurrection from that Death. We feel, all of us, that for every wrong, there is a right somewhere, had we but the skill to

find it. This call for a great man is sometimes long and loud, before he comes, for he comes not of man's calling but of God's appointment.

This was the state of mankind many centuries ago, before Jesus was born at Bethlehem. Scarce ever had there been an age, when a deliverer was more needed. The world was full of riches. Wealth flowed into the cities, a Pactolian tide. Fleets swam the ocean. The fields were full of cattle and corn. The high-piled warehouse at Alexandria and Corinth groaned with the munitions of luxury, the product of skilful hands. Delicate women, the corrupted and the corrupters of the world's metropolis, scarce veiled their limbs in garments of gossamer, fine as woven wind. Metals and precious stones vied with each other to render Loveliness more lovely, and Beauty more attractive, or oftener to stimulate a jaded taste, and whip the senses to their work. Nature, with that exquisite irony men admire but cannot imitate — used the virgin lustre of the gem, to reveal more plain, the moral ugliness of such as wore the gaud. The very marble seemed animate to bud and blossom into Palace and Temple. But alas for man in those days! The Strong have always known one part of their duty, — how to take care of themselves; and so have laid burthens on weak men's shoulders, but the more difficult part, how to take care of the weak, their natural clients, they neither knew nor practised so well even as now. If the history of the Strong is ever written, as such, it will be the record of rapine and murder, from Cain to Cush, from Nimrod to Napoleon.

In that age men cried for a great man, and wonderful to tell, the prophetic spirit of human nature, which detects events in their causes, and by its profound faith in the invisible, sees both the cloud and the star, before they come up to the horizon, — foretold the advent of such a man. "An ancient and settled opinion," says a Roman writer, "had spread over all the East, that it was fated at this time, for some one

to arise out of Judea, and rule the world." We find this expectation in many shapes, psalm and song, poem and prophecy. We sometimes say this prediction was miraculous, while it appears rather as the natural forecast of hearts, which believe God has a remedy for each disease, and balm for every wound. The expectation of relief is deep and certain with such, just as the evil is imminent and dreadful. If it have lasted long and spread wide, men only look for a greater man. This fact shows how deep in the soul lies that religious element, which sees clearest in the dark, when understanding cannot see at all; which hopes most, when there is least ground, but most need of hope. But men go too far in their expectations. Their Faith stimulates their Fancy, which foretells what the deliverer shall be. In this, men are always mistaken. Heaven has endowed the race of men with but little invention. So in those times of trouble, they look back to the last peril, and hope for a redeemer like him they had before; greater it may be, but always of the same kind. This same poverty of invention and habit of thinking the future must reproduce the past, appears in all human calculations. If some one had told the amanuensis of Julius Cæsar, that in eighteen centuries, men would be able in a few hours to make a perfect copy of a book twenty times as great as all his master's commentaries and history, he would pronounce it impossible; for he could think of none but the old method of a Scribe forming each word with a pen, letter by letter; never anticipating the modern way of printing with a rolling press driven by steam. So if some one had told Joab, that two thousand years after his day, men in war would kill one another with a missile half an ounce in weight, and would send it three or four hundred yards, driving it through a shirt of mail, or a ploughshare of iron, he would think but of a common bow and arrows, and say it cannot be. What would Zeuxis have thought of a portrait made in thirty seconds, exact as nature, penciled

by the Sun himself? Now men make mistakes in their expectation of a deliverer. The Jews were once raised to great power by David, and again rescued from distress and restored from exile by Cyrus, a great conqueror and a just man. Therefore the next time they fell into trouble, they expected another King like David, or Cyrus, who should come, perhaps in the clouds, with a great army to do much more than either David or Cyrus had done. This was the current expectation, that when the Redeemer came, he should be a great general, commander of an army, King of the Jews. He was to restore the exiles, defeat their foes, and revive the old theocracy to which other nations should be subservient.

Their deliverer comes; but instead of a noisy general, a king begirt with the pomp of oriental royalty, there appears one of the lowliest of men. His Kingdom was of Truth, and therefore not of this world. He drew no sword; uttered no word of violence; did not complain when persecuted, but took it patiently; did not exact a tooth for a tooth, nor pay a blow with a blow, but loved men who hated him. This conqueror, who was to come with great pomp, perhaps in the clouds, with an army numerous as the locusts, at whose every word, kingdoms were to shake — appears; born in a stable, of the humblest extraction; the companion of fishermen, living in a town, whose inhabitants were so wicked, men thought nothing good could come of it. The means he brought for the salvation of his race were quite as surprising as the Saviour himself; not armies on earth, or in heaven; not even new tables of laws; but a few plain directions, copied out from the primitive and eternal Scripture God wrote in the heart of man, — the true Protevangelium, — LOVE MAN; LOVE GOD; RESIST NOT EVIL; ASK AND RECEIVE. These were the weapons with which to pluck the oppressor down from his throne; to destroy the conquerors of the world; dislodge sin from high places and low places; uplift the degrad-

ed, and give weary and desperate human nature a fresh start! How disappointed men would have looked, could it have been made clear to them, that this was now the only deliverer Heaven was sending to their rescue. But this could not be; their recollection of past deliverance, and their prejudice of the future based on this recollection, blinded their eyes. They said, “This is not he; when the Christ cometh no man shall know whence he is. But we know this is the Nazarene carpenter, the Son of Joseph and Mary.” Men treated this greatest of Saviours as his humble brothers had always been treated. Even his disciples were not faithful; one betrayed him with a kiss; the rest forsook him and fled; his enemies put him to death, adding ignominy to their torture, and little thinking this was the most effectual way to bring about the end he sought, and scatter the seed, whence the whole race was to be blessed for many a thousand years.

There is scarce anything in nature more astonishing to a reflective mind, than the influence of one man's thought and feeling over another, and on thousands of his fellows. There are few voices in the world, but many echoes, and so the history of the world is chiefly the rise and progress of the thoughts and feelings of a few great men. Let a man's outward position be what it may, that of a Slave or a King, or an apparent idler in a busy Metropolis, if he have more Wisdom, Love, and Religion, than any of his fellow mortals, their Mind, Heart, and Soul are put in motion even against their will, and they cannot stand where they stood before, though they close their eyes never so stiffly. The general rule holds doubly strong in this particular case. This poor Galilean peasant, son of the humblest people, born in an ox's crib; who at his best estate had not where to lay his head; who passed for a fanatic with his townsmen, and even with his brothers, — children of the same parents; — who was reckoned a luna-

tic — a very madman, or counted as one possessed of a devil, by grave, respectable folk about Jerusalem; who was put to death as a Rebel and Blasphemer at the instance of Pharisees, the High-priest, and other sacerdotal functionaries — he stirred men's mind, heart, and soul, as none before nor since has done, and produced a revolution in human affairs, which is even now greater than all other revolutions, though it has hitherto done but a little of its work.

He looked trustfully up to the Father of all. Because he was faithful God inspired him, till his judgment, in religious matters, seems to have become certain as instinct, infallible as the law of gravitation, and his will irresistible, because it was no longer partial, but God's will flowing through him. He gave voice to the new thought which streamed on him, asking no question whether Moses or Solomon, in old time, had thought as he; nor whether Gamaliel and Herod would vouch for the doctrine now. He felt that in him was something greater than Moses or Solomon, and he did not, as many have done, dishonor the greater, to make a solemn mockery of serving the less. He spoke what he felt, fearless as Truth. He lived in blameless obedience to his sentiment and his principle. With him there was no great gulf between Thought and Action, Duty and Life. If he saw Sin in the land, — and when or where could he look and not see that last of the giants? — he gave warning to all who would listen. Before the single eye of this man, still a youth, the reverend veils fell off from antiquated falsehood; the looped and windowed livery of Abraham dropped from recreant limbs, and the child of the Devil stood there, naked but not unshamed. He saw that blind men, the leaders and the led, were hastening to the same ditch. Well might he weep for the slain of his people, and cry "Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem"! Few heard his cries, for it seems fated, that when the Son of Man comes he shall *not* find faith on the Earth. Pity alike for the oppressed and the

oppressor, — and a boundless love, even for the unthankful and the merciless, burned in his breast, and shed their light and warmth wherever he turned his face. His thought was heavenly; his life only revealed his thought. His soul appeared in his words, on which multitudes were fed. Prejudice itself confessed — "never man spake like this." His feeling and his thought assumed a form more beautiful still, and a whole divine life was wrought out on the earth, and stands there yet, the imperishable type of human achievement, the despair of the superstitious, but the Way, the Truth, and the Life to holy souls. His word of doctrine was uttered gently as the invisible dew comes down on the rose of Engaddi, but it told as if a thunderbolt smote the globe. It brought fire and sword to the dwelling place of hoary Sin. Truth sweeps clean off every refuge of lies, that she may do her entire work.

A few instances show how these words wrought in the world. The sons of Zebedee were so ambitious they would arrogate to themselves the first place in the new kingdom, thinking it a realm where selfishness should hold dominion, — so bloody-minded, they would call down fire from Heaven to burn up such men as would not receive the Teacher. But the Spirit of gentleness subdues the selfish passion, and the son of thunder becomes the gentle John, who says only, "Little children, love one another." This same word passes into Simon Peter also, the crafty, subtle, hasty, selfish son of Jonas; the first to declare the Christ; the first to promise fidelity, but the first likewise to deny him, and the first to return to his fishing. It carries this disciple — though perhaps never wholly regenerated — all over the eastern world; and he, who had shrunk from the fear of persecution, now glories therein, and counts it all joy, when he falls into trouble on account of the word. With Joseph of Arimathea "an honorable counsellor," and Nicodemus "a ruler of the Jews," the matter took another turn. We never hear of them in

the history of trial. They slunk back into the Synagogue, it may be; wore garments long as before, and phylacteries of the broadest; were called of men "Rabbi," "sound, honorable men, who knew what they were about," "men not to be taken in." It is not of such men God makes Reformers, Apostles, Prophets. It is not for such pusillanimous characters, to plunge into the cold, hard stream of Truth, as it breaks out of the mountain and falls from the rock of ages. They wait till the stream widens to a river, the river expands its accumulated waters to a lake, quiet as a mirror. Then they confide themselves in their delicate and trim-wrought skiff to its silvery bosom, to be wafted by gentle winds into a quiet haven of repose. Such men do not take up Truth, when she has fallen by the way-side. It might grieve their friends. It would compromise their interests; would not allow them to take their ease in their inn, for such they regard their station in the world. Besides, the thing was new. How could Joseph and Nicodemus foretell it would prevail? It might lead to disturbance; its friends fall into trouble. The Kingdom of Heaven offered no safe "investment" for ease and reputation, as now. Doubtless there were in Jerusalem great questionings of heart among Pharisees, and respectable men, Scribes and Doctors of the law, when they heard of the new teacher and his doctrine so deep and plain. There must have been a severe struggle in many bosoms, between the conviction of duty and social sympathies which bound the man to what was most cherished by flesh and blood.

The beautiful Gospel found few adherents and little toleration with men learned in the law, burthened with its minute intricacies, devoted to the mighty consideration of small particulars. But the true disciples of the inward life felt the word, which others only listened for, and they could not hush up the matter. It would not be still. So they took up the ark of truth, where Jesus set it down, and bore it on. They perilled

their lives. They left all — comfort, friends, home, wife, the embraces of their children — the most precious comfort the poor man gets out of the cold, hard world; they went naked and hungry; were stoned and spit upon; scourged in the synagogues; separated from the company of the sons of Abraham; called the vilest of names; counted as the off-scouring of the world. But it did them good. This was the sifting Satan gave the disciples, and the chaff went its way, as chaff always does; but the seed-wheat fell into good ground, and now nations are filled with bread which comes of the apostles' sowing and watering, and God giving the increase.

To some men the spread of Christianity in two centuries appears wonderful. To others it is the most natural thing in the world. It could not help spreading. Things most needful to all are the easiest to comprehend, the world over. Thus every savage in Otaheite knows there is a God; while only four or five men in Christendom understand his nature, essence, personality, and "know all about Him!" Thus while the great work of a modern scholar, which explains the laws of the material heavens, has never probably been mastered by three hundred persons, and perhaps there is not now on earth half that number, who can read and understand it, without farther preparation; the Gospel, the word of Jesus, which sets forth the laws of the soul, can be understood by any pious girl fourteen years old, of ordinary intelligence, with no special preparation at all, and still forms the daily bread, and very life of whole millions of men.

Primitive Christianity was a very simple thing, apart from the individual errors connected with it; two great speculative maxims set forth its essential doctrines, "Love man," and "Love God." It had also two great practical maxims, which grew out of the speculative, "we that are strong ought to bear the burthens of the weak," and "we must

give good for evil." These maxims lay at the bottom of the apostles' minds, and the top of their hearts. These explain their conduct; account for their courage; give us the reason of their faith, their strength, their success. The proclaimers of these maxims set forth the life of a man in perfect conformity therewith. If their own practice fell short of their preaching, — which sometimes happens spite of their zeal — there was the measure of a perfect man, to which they had not attained, but which lay in their future progress. Other matters which they preached, that there was one God; that the soul never dies, were known well enough before, and old heathens, in centuries gone by, had taught these doctrines quite as distinctly as the apostles, and the latter much more plainly than the Gospels. These new teachers had certain other doctrines peculiar to themselves, which hindered the course of truth more than they helped it, and which have perished with their authors.

No wonder the apostles prevailed with such doctrines, set off or recommended by a life, which — notwithstanding occasional errors — was single-hearted, lofty, full of self-denial and sincere manliness. "All men are brothers," said the Apostles; "their duty is to keep the law God wrote eternally on the heart, to keep this without fear." The forms and rites they made use of; their love-feasts, and Lord's-Suppers; their baptismal and funeral ceremonies, were things indifferent, of no value, save only as helps. Like the cloak Paul left behind at Troas, and the fishing-coat of Simon Peter, they were to serve their turn, and then be laid aside. They were no more to be perpetual, than the sheep skins and goat skins, which likewise have apostolical authority in favor of their use. In an age of many forms, Christianity fell in with the times. It wore a Jewish dress at Jerusalem, and a Grecian costume at Thessalonica. It became all things to all men. Some rites of the early Church seem absurd as many of the latter; but all had a meaning

once, or they would not have been. Men of New England would scarce be willing to worship as Barnabas and Clement did; nor could Bartholomew and Philip be satisfied with our simpler form it is possible. Each age of the world has its own way, which the next smiles at as ridiculous. Still the four maxims, mentioned above, give the spirit of primitive Christianity, the life of the Apostles' life.

It is not marvellous these men were reckoned unsafe persons. Nothing in the world is so dangerous and untractable in a false state of society, as one who loves man and God. You cannot silence him by threat or torture; nor scare him with any fear. Set in the stocks to-day, he harangues men in public to-morrow. "Herod will kill thee," says one. "Go and tell that fox, behold I cast out devils, and deceivers to-day and to-morrow, and the third day I shall be perfected," is the reply. Burn or behead such men, and out of their blood, and out of their ashes, there spring up others, who defy you to count them, and say, "come, kill us, if you list, we shall never be silent." Love begets love, the world over, and martyrdom makes converts certain as steel sparks, when smitten against the flint. If a fire is to burn in the woods — let it be blown upon.

Primitive Christianity did not owe its spread to the address of its early converts. They boast of this fact. The Apostles, who held these four maxims, were plain men; very rough Galilean fishermen; rude in speech, and not over courteous in address, if we may credit the epistles of Paul and James. They had incorrect notions in many points, which both we and they deem vital. Some of them — perhaps all — expected a resurrection of the body; others, that the Jewish law, with its burthensome rites and ostentatious ceremonies, was to be perpetual, binding on all Christians and the human race. Some fancied — as it appears — that Jesus had expiated the sins of all mankind; others that he had existed before

he was born into this world. These were doctrines of Jewish and Heathen parentage. All of these men — so far as the New Testament enables us to judge — looked for the visible return of Jesus to the earth, with clouds and great glory, and expected the destruction of the world, and that in very few years. These facts are very plain to all, who will read the epistles and gospels, in spite of the dust which Interpreters cast in the eyes of common sense. Some apocryphal works, perhaps older than the canonical, certainly accepted as authentic in some of the early churches, relate the strangest marvels about the doings and sayings of Jesus, designing thereby to exhibit the greatness of his character, while they show how little that was understood. We all know what the canonical writings contain on this head, and from these two sources can derive much information, as to the state of opinion among the apostles and their immediate successors. Simon Peter, notwithstanding his visions, seems always to have been in bondage to the law of sin and death, if we may trust Paul's statement in the epistle; James — if the letter be his — had irrational notions on some points, and even Paul, the largest-minded of them all, was not disposed to allow woman the rights, which Reason claims for the last creation of God. But what if these men were often mistaken, and sometimes on matters of great moment? We need not deny the fact, for the sake of an artificial theory snatched out of the air. It is not expedient to lie in behalf of truth, however common it has been. We need not fear Christianity shall fall, because Christians were mistaken in any age. Were human beings ever free from errors of opinion; imperfection in action? Has the nature of things changed, and did the earth bring forth superhuman men in the first century? It does not appear. But underneath these mistakes, errors, follies, of the primitive Christians, there beat the noble heart of religious love, which sent life into their every limb. These max-

ims, they had learned from Jesus, seen exhibited in his life, found written on their heart, — these did the work, spite of the imperfection and passions of the apostles, Paul withstanding Peter to the face, and predicting events that never came to pass. The nobleness of the heart found its way up to the head, and neutralized errors of thought.

By means of these causes the doctrines spread. The expecting people felt their deliverer had come, and welcomed the glad tidings. Each year brought new converts to the work, and the zeal of the Christian burnt brighter with his success. Paul undertook many missions, and the word of God grew mightily and prevailed. In him we see a striking instance of the power of real Christianity to recast the character. We cannot forbear to dwell a moment on the theme.

There are two classes of men, who come to Religion. Some seem to be born spiritual. They are aboriginal saints; natives of Heaven, whom accident has stranded on the earth; men of few passions, of no tendency to violence, anger, or excess in anything. They do not hesitate, between right and wrong, but go the true way as naturally as the bird takes to the air, and the fish to the water, because it is their natural element, and they cannot help it. Reason and Religion seem to be coeval. Their Christianity and their consciousness are of the same date. Desire and Duty, putting in the warp and woof, weave harmoniously, like sisters, the many-colored web of life. To these men life is easy; it is not that long warfare which it is to so many. It costs them nothing to be good. Their desires are dutiful; their duties desirable. (They have no virtue, which implies struggle. They are goodness all over, which is the harmony of all the powers. Their action is their repose; their religion their self-indulgence; their daily life the most perfect worship. Say what we will of the world, these men, who are angels born, are happier in their lot than

such as are only angels bred, whose religion is not a matter of birth but of hard earnings. They start in their flight to Heaven from an eminence, which other souls find it arduous to attain, and roll down, like the stone of Sisyphus, many times in the perilous ascent. Paul was not born of this nobility of Heaven.

The other class are men of will; hard, iron men, who have passions and doubts and fears, and a whole legion of appetites in their bosom, but yet come armed with a strong sense of duty, a masculine intellect, a tendency upwards towards God, a great heart of flesh, contracting and expanding between self-love, and love of man. These are the men who feel the puzzle of the world, and are taken with its fever; stout-hearted, strong-headed men, who love strongly and hate with violence, and do with their might whatever they do at all. These are the men that make the heroes of the world. They break the way in Philosophy and Science; they found colonies; lead armies; make laws; construct systems of theology; form sects in the Church; a yoke of iron will not hold them, nor that of public opinion, more difficult to break. When these men become religious, they are beautiful as angels. The fire of God falls on them; it consumes their dross; the uncorrupted gold remains in virgin purity. Once filled with religion, their zeal never cools. You shall not daunt them with the hissing of the great and learned; nor scare them with the roar of the street, or the armies of a king. To these men the axe of the headsman, yes, all the tortures, malice can devise or tyranny inflict, are as nothing. The resolute soul puts down the flesh; and finds in embers a bed of roses. To this class belonged Paul, a man evidently quick to see, stern to resolve, and immovable in executing; a man of iron will, that nothing could break down; of strong moral sense, deep religious faith, and a singular greatness of heart towards his fellow men; but yet furnished with an overpow-

ering energy of passion, which might warp his moral sense, his faith, his philanthropy aside, and make him a bigot, the slave of superstition, a fanatic, perverse as Loyola, and desperate as Saint Dominic. In him the good and the evil of the old dispensation seemed to culminate; for he had all the pity of David, which charms us in the shepherd-Psalm; all the diabolic hatred, which appears in true curses of that king, who was so wondrous a mixture of heaven, earth, and hell. In addition to this natural character, Paul received a Jewish education, at the feet of Gamaliel, — a Pharisee of the strictest sect. His earlier life at Tarsus brought him in contact with the Greeks, intensifying his bigotry for the time, but yet facilitating his escape from the shackles of a worn-out ritual.

It is easy to see how the doctrines of Jesus would strike the young Pharisee, fresh from the study of the law. Christianity set aside all he valued most; struck down the law; held the prophets of small account; put off the ritual; declared the temple no better place to pray in than a fisher's boat; affirmed all men to be brothers, thus denying the merit of descent from Abraham, and declared, if any one loved God and man he should have treasure in Heaven, and inspiration while on earth. No wonder the old Pharisee whose soul was caught in the letter; no wonder the young Pharisee accustomed to swear by the old, felt pricked in their hearts and gnashed with their teeth. It is a hard thing, no doubt, for men, who count themselves children of Abraham, to be proved children of a very different stock, dutiful sons of the great father of lies. It is easy to fancy what Paul would think of the arrogance of the new teacher, to call himself greater than Solomon, or Jonah, and profess to see deeper down than the Law ever went; what of the presumption of the disciples, "unlearned and ignorant men," to pretend to teach doctrines wiser than Moses, when they could not read the letter of his word. It is no wonder he breathed out fire and slaughter, and "persecuted

them even unto strange cities." But it is dangerous to go too far in pursuit of heretical game. Men sometimes rouse up a lion, when they look for a linnnet, and the eater is himself eaten. But Paul had a good conscience in this. He believed what came of the fathers, never applying common sense to his theology, nor asking if these things be so. He thought he did God service by debasing His image, and helping to stone Stephen. At length he becomes a Christian in thought. We know not how the change took place. Perhaps he thought it miraculous, for, in common with most of his times and country, he never drew a sharp line between the common and the supernatural. He seems often to have dwelt in that cloudy land, where all things have a strange and marvellous aspect.

A later contemporary of Paul relates some of the most remarkable events, as he deemed them, which occurred in those times. He gives occasionally minute details of the superstition, crime, and madness of the emperors of Rome. But the most remarkable event, which occurred for some centuries after Tiberius, he never speaks of. Probably he knew nothing of it. Had he heard thereof, it would have seemed inconsiderable to this chronicler of imperial follies. But the journey from Jerusalem to Damascus of a young man named Saul — if we regard its cause and its consequences, was a more wonderful event than the world saw for the next thousand years. Men thought little of its result at the time. The gossips of the day had specious reasons, no doubt, for Paul's sudden conversion, and said he was disappointed of preference in the old state of things, and hoped for an easy living in the new; that he loved the distinction and notoriety the change would give him, and hoped also for the loaves and fishes, then so abundant in the new church. Doubtless there were some who said, "Paul is beside himself." But King Herod Agrippa took no notice of the matter. He was too

busy with his dreams of ambition and lust, to heed what befel a tent-maker from a Cilician city, in his journey from Jerusalem to Damascus. Yet from that time the history of the world turns on this point. If Paul had not been raised up by the Almighty, for this very work, so to say — who shall tell us how long Christianity would have lain concealed under the Jewish prejudice of its earlier disciples? These things are for no mortal to discover. But certain it is that Paul found the Christians an obscure Jewish sect, full of zeal and love, but narrow and bigotted, in bondage to the letter of old Hebrew institutions; but he left them a powerful band in all great cities, free men by the law of the Spirit of life. It seems doubtful, that Peter, James, or John would have given Christianity its natural form of universal faith.

There must have been a desperate struggle before Paul became a Christian. He must renounce all the prejudices of the Jew and the Pharisee, and the idols of the Tribe and the Den are the last a man gives up. He must be abandoned by his friends, the wise, the learned, the venerable. Few men know of the battle between new convictions and old social sympathies; but it is of the severest character; a war of extermination. He must condemn all his past conduct; lose the reputation of consistency; leave all the comforts of society, all chance of reputation among men; be counted as a thief and murderer; perhaps be put to death. But the truth conquered. We think it easy to decide as Paul, forgetting that many things become plain after the result, which were dim and doubtful before.

When the young man had decided in favor of Christianity, he would require some instruction in matters pertaining to the heavenly doctrine we should suppose, — taking the popular views of Christianity, which make it an historical thing, depending on personal authority, or eyewitness, and external events, as the only possible proof of internal

truths. He would go and sit down with the twelve and listen to their talk, and learn of all the miracles, how Jesus raised the young man, the maiden, called Lazarus from the tomb; how he changed the water into wine, and fed the five thousand; he would go to Martha and Mary to learn the recon-dite doctrine of the Saviour; to the Mother of Jesus, to inquire about his birth of the holy spirit. But the thing went different. He did not go to Peter, the chief apostle; nor to John, the beloved disciple; nor James, the Lord's brother. "I conferred not with flesh and blood," says the new convert, "neither went I up to Jerusalem to them that were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia." Three years afterwards, for the first time, he had an interview with Peter and James. Fourteen years later he went up to Jerusalem, to compare notes, as it were, with those "who seemed to be somewhat." They could tell him nothing new. At last — many years after the commencement of his active ministry — James, Peter, and John, give him the right hand of their fellowship. Paul, it seems, had heard of the great doctrines of Jesus, and out of their principles developed his scheme of Christianity, — not a very difficult task, one would fancy, for a plain man, who reckoned Christianity was love of man, and love of God. In those days the Gospels were not written, nor yet the Epistles. Christianity had no history, except that Jesus lived, preached, was crucified, and appeared after his crucifixion. Therefore the gospel Paul preached might well enough be different from those now in our hands. Certainly Paul never mentions a miracle of Jesus; says nothing of his superhuman birth. Had he known of these things, a man of his strong love of the marvellous would scarcely be silent.

In him primitive Christianity appears to the greatest advantage. It shone in his heart, like the rising sun chasing away the mist and clouds of night. His prejudices went first; his passions next. Soon he is on foot journeying the world over

to proclaim the faith, which once he destroyed. Where are his bigotry, prejudice, hatred, his idols of the Tribe and the Den? The flame of Religion has consumed them all. Forth he goes to the work; the strong passion, the unconquerable will are now directed in the same channel with his love of man. His mighty soul wars with Heathenism, declaring an idol is nothing; with Judaism, to announce that the Law has passed away; with Folly and Sin, to declare them of the Devil, and lead men to Truth and Peace. The resolute apostle goes flaming forth in his ministry. A soul more robust, great-hearted, and manly, does not appear in history, for some centuries at the least. Danger is nothing; persecution nothing. It only puts the keener edge on his well-tempered spirit. He is content and joyful at bearing all the reproaches man can lay on him. There was nothing sham in Paul. He felt what he said, which is common enough. But he lived what he felt, which is not so common. What wonder that such a man made converts, overcame violence, and helped the truth to triumph? It were wonderful if he had not. Take away the life and influence of Paul, the Christian world is a different thing; we cannot tell what it would have been. Under his hands, and those of his co-adjutors, the new faith spreads from heart to heart, till many thousands own the name, and amid all the persecution that follows, the pious of the earth celebrate such a jubilee as the sun never saw before.

However it was not among the great and refined, but the low and the rude, that the faith found its early confessors. Men came up faint and hungry, from the high-ways and hedges of society, to eat the bread of life at God's table. They ate and were filled. Here it is that all Religions take their rise. The sublime faith of the Hebrews began in a horde of slaves. The Christian has a carpenter for its revealer; fishermen for its first disciples; a tent-maker for its chief apostle. Yet these men could stand before kings' courts — and Felix trembled

at Paul's reasoning. Yes, the world trembled at such reasoning. And when whole multitudes gave in their adhesion; when the common means of tyranny, prisons, racks, and the cross, failed to repress "this detestable superstition," as ill-natured Tacitus calls it; but when two thousand men and women, delicate maidens, and men newly married, come to the Prætor, and say, "We are Christians all; kill us if you will; we cannot change;" then for the first time official persons begin to look into the matter, and inquire for the cause, which makes women heroines, and young men martyrs. There are always enough to join any folly because it is new. But when the headsman's axe gleams under his apron, or slaves erect a score of crosses in the market-place, and men see the mangled limbs of brothers, fathers, and sons, huddled into bloody sacks, or thrown to the dogs, it requires some heart to bear up, accept a new faith, and renounce mortal life.

It is sometimes asked, what made so many converts to Christianity, under such fearful circumstances? The answer depends on the man. Most men apply the universal solvent, and call it a miracle — an overstepping of the laws of mind. The Apostles had miraculous authority; Peter had miraculous revelations; Paul a miraculous conversion; both visions, and other miraculous assistance all their life. That they taught by miracles. But what could it be? The *authority* of the teachers? The authority of a Jewish peasant would not have passed for much at Ephesus or Alexandria, at Lycaonia or Rome. Were they infallibly inspired, so that they could not err, in doctrine, or practice? Thus it has been taught. But their opponents did not believe it; their friends knew nothing of it, or there had been no sharp dissension between Paul and Barnabas, nor any disagreement of Paul with Peter. They themselves seem never to have dreamed of such an infallibility, or they would not change their plans and doctrine

as Peter did; nor need instruction as Titus, Timothy, and all the primitive teachers, to whom James sent the circular epistle of the first synod. If they had believed themselves infallibly inspired, they would not assemble a council of all to decide, what each infallible person could determine, as well as all the spirits and angels together. Still less could any discussion arise among the apostles as to the course to be pursued. Was it their learning that gave them success? They could not even interpret the Psalms, without making the most obvious mistakes, as anyone may see, who reads the book of Acts. Was it their *eloquence*, their miraculous gift of tongues? What was the eloquence of Peter, or James, when Paul, their chief apostle, was weak in bodily presence, and contemptible in speech? No; it was none of these things. They had somewhat more convincing than authority; wiser than learning; more persuasive than eloquence. Men *felt* the doctrine was true and divine. They saw its truth and divinity mirrored in the life of these rough men; they heard the voice of God in their own hearts say, it is true. They tried it by the standard God has placed in the heart, and it stood the test. They saw the effect it had on Christians themselves, and said, "Here at least is something divine, for men do not gather grapes of thorns." When men came out from hearing Peter or Paul set forth the Christian doctrine and apply it to life, they did not say, "what a moving speaker; how beautifully he 'divides the word;' how he mixes the light of the sun, and the roar of torrents, and the sublimity of the stars, as it were, in his speech; what a melting voice; what graceful gestures; what beautiful similes gathered from all the arts, sciences, poetry, and nature herself." It was not with such reflections they entertained their journey home. They said, "what shall we do to be saved?"

Primitive Christianity was a wonderful element, as it

came into the world. Like a two-edged sword, it cut down through all the follies and falseness of four thousand years. It acknowledged what was good and true in all systems, and sought to show its own agreement with goodness and truth, wherever found. It told men what they were. It bade them hope, look upon the light, and aspire after the most noble end — to be complete men, to be reconciled to the will of God, and so become one with him. It gave the world assurance of a man, by showing one whose life was beautiful as his doctrine, and that combined all the excellence of all former teachers, and went before the world, thousands of years. It told men there was one God — who had made of one blood all the nations of the earth, and was a Father to each man. It showed that all men are brothers. Believing in these doctrines; seeing the greatness of man's nature in the very ruin sin had wrought; filled with the beauty of a good life, the comforting thought, that God is always near, and ready to help, no wonder men felt moved in their heart. The life of the apostles and early Christians, the self-denial they practised, their readiness to endure persecution, their love one for the other, beautifully enforced the words of truth and love.

One of the early champions of the faith appeals in triumph to the excellence of Christians, which even Julian of a later day was forced to confess. You know the Christians soon as you see them, he says; they are not found in taverns, nor places of infamous resort; they neither game, nor lie, nor steal, attend the baths, or the theatres, they are not selfish but loving. The multitude looked on, at first to see "whereunto the thing would grow." They saw, and said, see how these Christians love one another; how the new religion takes down the selfishness of the proud, makes avarice charitable, and the voluptuary self-denying.

This new spirit of piety, of love to man, and love to God,

the active application of the great Christian maxims to life, led to a manly religion; not to that pale-faced pietism which hangs its head on Sundays, and does nothing but whine out its sentimental cant on week-days, in hopes to make this drivelling pass current for real manly excellence. No; it led to a noble, upright frame of mind, heart, and soul, and in this way it conquered the world. The first apostles of Christianity were persuasive, through the power of truth. They told what they had felt. They had been under the Law, and knew its thralldom; they had escaped from the iron furnace, and could teach others the way. No doubt, the wisest of them was in darkness on many points. Their general ignorance, in the eyes of the scholar, must have stood in strange contrast with their clear view of religious truth. It seems, as Paul says, that God had chosen the foolish and the weak, to confound the mighty and the wise. Now we have accomplished scholars, skilled in all the lore of the world, accomplished orators; but who does the work of Paul and Timothy? Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings praise was perfected; out of the mouth of clerks and orators what do we get? — Well said Jeremiah, "The prophets shall become wind, and the word not be in them."

If we come from the days of the apostles to their successors, and still later, we find the errors of the first teachers have become magnified; the truth of Christianity is dim; men had wandered farther from that great light God sent into the world. The errors of the Pagans, the Jews, the errors of obstinate men, who loved to rule God's heritage better than to be ensamples unto the flock, had worked their way. The same freedom did not prevail as before. The word of God had become a letter; men looked back, not forward. Superstition came into the church. The rites of Christianity — its accidents, not its substance — held an undue place;

ascetism was esteemed more than hitherto. The body began to be reckoned unholy; Christ regarded as a God, not a man living as God commands. Then the Priest was separated from the people, and a flood of evils came upon the church, and accomplished what persecution, with her headsmen, and her armies, never could effect. Christianity was grossly corrupted long before it ascended the throne of the world. But for this corruption it would have found no place in the court of Rome or Byzantium. Still in the writings of early Christians, of Tertullian and Cyprian, for example, we find a real living spirit, spite of the superstition, bigotry, and falseness too obvious in the men. They spake because they had somewhat to say, and were earnest in their speech. You come down from the writings of Seneca to Cyprian, you miss the elegant speech, the wonderful mastery over language, and the stores of beautiful imagery, with which that hard, bombastic Roman sets off his thought. But in the Christian — you find an earnestness and a love of man, which the Roman had not, and a fervent piety, to which he made no pretension. But alas, for the superstition of the Bishop, his austerity and unchristian doctrines! It remains doubtful, whether an enlightened man, who had attained a considerable growth in religious excellence, would not justly have preferred the Religion of Seneca to that of Cyprian; but there is no doubt such an one would have accepted with joyful faith the religion of Jesus — the primitive Christianity undefiled by men. To come down from the Christianity of Christ, to the Religion popularly taught in the churches of New England, and we ask, can it be this for which men suffered martyrdom — this, which changed the face of the world? Is this matter, for which sect contends with sect, to save the Heathen world? Christianity was a simple thing in Paul's time; in Christ's it was simpler still. But what is it now? A modern writer some-

what quaintly says, the early writers of the Christian church knew what Christianity was; they were the *fathers*; the scholastics and philosophers of the dark ages knew what Reason was; they were the *doctors*; the religionists of modern times know neither what is Christianity, nor what is Reason; they are the *scrutators*.

About the Author

THEODORE PARKER was born in 1810 in Lexington, Massachusetts, the tenth and youngest child of a farm family. His mother died when he was 12. At 16, he became a schoolteacher. At 19, he passed the entrance examinations for Harvard College, but was unable to attend. At 22, he started an academy at Watertown, where he met Lydia Dodge Cabot. He gained admission to Harvard Divinity School in 1834 and graduated in 1836. In 1837, he married Lydia Cabot and became minister of the West Roxbury Unitarian church. Parker's studies of the new German historical biblical criticism, especially W. M. L. De Wette's *Critical and Historical Introduction to the Old Testament* (1817) and D. F. Strauss's *Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* (1835), led him to speak out publicly against the literal factuality of biblical miracles and prophecies. This brought him into conflict with some other Unitarian ministers and their association, but it brought him into contact with the emerging Transcendentalists, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and George Ripley. He published numerous articles in *The Dial* during its brief existence, and his controversies with the Unitarians became more public and more pronounced. In 1846 he resigned his ministership in West Roxbury to become minister of the newly-formed 28th Congregational Society in Boston, which met at first in the Melodeon Theater and later in the Boston Music Hall, eventually drawing crowds of more than 2,000 worshippers. He denounced the Mexican War, opposed the Fugitive Slave Act, and secretly helped finance John Brown's insurrection. Parker became ill with tuberculosis in 1858–1859, and sought to recoup his health by travel. He died May 10, 1860 in Florence, Italy. An excellent biographical sketch by Dean Grodzins is online at <http://www.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/theodoreparker.html>