

## JESUS.

BY JOHN DENMARK.

I SAT down at the pipe-organ in my church last night and played "More About Jesus." We sang the song lustily—the choir was gathered around me—and ended up with a glow of satisfaction. It is a good song for young throats and a good song for the pipe-organ. It is more than that. Its central theme is the aim of all those who are searching for the truth about Christianity.

There can be no doubt what most men think concerning Jesus. Here in our Western civilization he is the Ideal of morality and faith. About him are clustered all the tender associations of religious devotion and unselfish service. To be Christlike is the highest goal of religious and moral growth, that has been my teaching and the teaching of millions of other religious men reared in Christian homes. The admiration for Jesus is evident not only in the church but in the labor union, the anarchist hall, the army, and the saloon. Never has a name stood so high in the affection of men as the name of Jesus.

So a candid examination of Jesus is a delicate and dangerous thing. When Barnum said that the American public likes to be fooled, he might have added that we all hate the man who disillusion us about any favorite belief. We persist in misunderstanding him although his meaning may be as clear as sunlight.

Now I might be described, as to my morality, as the very essence of a "Christian gentleman." Perhaps I have been better than ordinary. I have never taken the name of God in vain, consumed so much as a mouthful of intoxicating liquor, stolen anything larger than a street-car nickel, or gone the way of the brothel. I was looked upon in my youth as a model Sunday-school boy, and I still have that general reputation.

But Jesus Christ is not my ideal and never will be. I am going to put down here why that is true.

When I was a child, Jesus was for me the Great Magician who stilled the waters, healed the sick, and made the blind to see. He was a great and perfect god, just as good a god as anybody wanted anywhere, and to disbelieve in this fact would bring my soul into danger of eternal damnation. Jesus was my religious Santa Claus.

When the time for disillusionment came, and Santa Claus and my parents lost their halos, the figure of Jesus was still untouched. My Sunday-school teachers at sixteen said the same things about Jesus which my Sunday-school teachers in the kindergarten had said.

In my university life the rude attacks of philosophy and higher criticism upon religion shook me profoundly, but these attacks were not directed against Jesus. I soon found that the professor who dared to make an open and frank criticism of Jesus in the classroom did not exist even in the state university. The professor handled Nero, Napoleon, and Mohammed without gloves. Jesus of Nazareth who was said to be the greatest single force in history was carefully left to the discussion of the clergy.

So I emerged from the university with my picture of Jesus only slightly marred. Plunging into the studies of a theological seminary, I found that my professors did not believe in Jesus in the same way that I did. Now, I thought, I will find out for myself what Jesus really means to the world. What is the secret of his tremendous influence over men?

My first critical study of the gospels gave me a new Jesus. I had dreamed of a magician. When I looked into the Bible with care I found a prophet of rare passion and force, but a man ignorant and superstitious. The Jesus who stepped out of the pages of the New Testament to greet me was a towering and twisted figure, magnetic in his power but surrounded by all sorts of foolish traditions that were obviously just as groundless as those traditions that held Buddhists and Mohammedans in their thralldom of ignorance. I found that there is no proof for a single miracle in the Old Testament or the New. Yet it is perfectly evident that the largest part of the power of Jesus in the early growth of Christianity was due to the carefully nurtured belief that he had magic powers out of all proportion to the power of any other prophet or leader.

The leaders of our theological seminaries know that there is no proof for any of Jesus's miracles that would be considered as acceptable for the proving of Mohammed's miracles, but they carefully avoid stating this fact in such a way that the people and the students can understand. Everywhere I have found a conspiracy of silence not only in regard to the miracles of Jesus but in regard to the other indefensible traditions that have grown up around him. The business of the theological school is to produce Christian ministers, and the rebel who questions the foundation of Christianity while he is in the seminary is like the soldier who announces

his disloyalty to the flag after he has marched to the battlefield. On the battlefield

“There’s not to reason why:  
There’s but to do and die.”

I died. That is, my conscience was forgotten in the roar of battle. I shoved my real self aside in order to accomplish results. I followed the religious flag of my fathers because I was eager to be up and doing while youth and strength were mine.

Plunging into the work of a great-city parish I found that the condition of the clerical mind concerning Jesus was even more chaotic than that of the student’s mind. Barrels of sermons were preached on the perfection of the character and teachings of Jesus by men who never would dream of following in his way for a single day. Nowhere outside of the small group of Unitarian leaders did I find ministers who frankly asked themselves, Is this declaration of Jesus true? If not, how can I preach him as an ideal? I noticed that the questions concerning the divinity or deity of Jesus were cleverly evaded by the more intelligent pastors. “Jesus is our great leader,” they said, “and the test of our worth in the Father’s sight is determined by our faithfulness in following him.”

I believe that the almost universal dishonesty about Jesus among the clergy is not at all deliberate. The preacher is usually as honest as the average lawyer or advertiser; he will interpret truth according to the visible results of his labor. If his preaching of Jesus is effective in winning members to his church and making them upright morally, he will go on preaching in the old way. It probably never occurs to him that other causes may be operating to bring the success of Christianity besides its truth. He does not realize that perhaps the most effective sermons for an ignorant congregation are the most untrue. So he leaves unasked the most rudimentary questions about Jesus: “If Jesus was the embodiment of God, why did he make so many mistakes? Why did he think and preach that the world was coming to an end within one generation? Why did he not leave us more clear and definite statements of the will of God? Why did he not save the world about 30 A. D. by making the supremacy of his moral law known?”

In confronting such questions as these, the average minister resorts to the refuge of agnosticism. We do not know the ways and the aims of God. God never intended man to know all these things. So we do not necessarily have to answer “foolish questions.”

The continued emphasis upon faith as superior to reason has

had its effect. It is now possible for the religious man to pass over the most fundamental and searching questions in regard to Christianity without analysis by the simple assertion, "We cannot understand all the mysteries of the incarnation of God's spirit in Jesus Christ, but we know from experience that it is a fact."

To which the opponent of Christianity makes reply: "What do we know about Jesus Christ from experience?"

He was a Jew who lived almost two thousand years ago. He spoke a language which would be utterly unintelligible to us to-day. He never wrote anything which would give us an exact idea of his teaching and personality. We do not know what he looked like, when he was born, and when he died. What we know about his life is summed up in badly jumbled conjecture written in a language which he did not speak, by men some of whom he never saw. Only three of the thirty-three or more years of his life are known to us and our accounts of those three years differ widely. Outside of the few faithful followers who held firm to the end Jesus made no lasting impression upon the people of his time. We are asked to reject the judgment of the whole world of Jesus's time, which stamped him as an unimportant preacher, and accept the estimate of those who followed him as a God, a Magician, and a Prophet.

The opponent of Christianity insists that we do not know enough about the historical Jesus to worship him or follow him with any enthusiasm or certainty. The perfection of his character and the power of his magic healing cannot be a part of our experience because we are not sure that they ever existed. They are a part of Christian tradition and nothing more. The Jesus who flits across the stage of the New Testament, loving, praying, cursing, and healing is quite too vague in his outlines to convey any clear picture to us.

Common sense will tell us that when a figure is so dim as that of the historical Jesus there is a great temptation to appropriate the figure for the advancement of all varieties of reform. The human race likes to dream of idols and then find an idol to fit the dream. Jesus has become the Great Dream Prophet of the Western hemisphere because there have clustered about him the yearnings and imaginings of a credulous race. So we have virtually created a "Christ" who bears the relation to the historical Jesus that the personality of the "real Santa Claus" bears to the personality of our father.

Jesus has been identified with an Ideal Dream because the mystery surrounding his life gives room for the free play of imagination. If our Santa Claus were dressed in a blue shirt and overalls

he would be a ridiculous failure. There would be no romance about him. So we take our Christ from a land on the other side of the world where customs and traditions allow these magic fringings which are so necessary to stimulate the imagination. Palestine and the Jews will not worship with us at Bethlehem, for they know Bethlehem too well. . . .

When modern scholarship tore away the grave-clothes from the buried Jesus, men began to see the difference between the dream and the reality. A wave of acute Unitarianism swept the country. Then dream-loving human nature reasserted itself and "reconciled" the Christ ideal with the spirit of Jesus by carefully culling out the ideal from the superstitious. But the task has not been well done. The patchwork shows.

Two-thirds of the people of America are outside of the Church partially because they feel that Jesus does not really save them. They feel that the personality of Jesus will not stretch to the dimensions of an omnipotent Christ.

The reasons why we cannot maintain the old devotion to Jesus become clear when we analyze the records in our possession and ask two leading questions.

Is Jesus as he is sketched in the New Testament sufficiently compelling to command our worship of him as a perfect leader? Are his chief teachings as recorded in the New Testament fundamentally true?

Jesus the Magician is so near the front of the stage at all times in the New Testament narrative that we can scarcely extricate Jesus the Man. We judge, however, that he was kind and benevolent, for he loved little children and expressed great anxiety for the hungry multitudes who followed him. He liked to describe himself as the Good Shepherd, and his people were evidently struck with the aptness of the description. He must have been exceedingly brave. He defied the Pharisees in their own haunts and stood before Pilate with all the self-mastery of a stoic. His large audiences, won without any political prestige to aid him, show that he was a powerful personality with splendid oratorical powers. His vitriolic denunciation of the Pharisees and his wrathful attack upon the moneychangers in the Temple reveal a man of impulsive anger. His habits of dining with publicans and sinners and of working with poor folks showed that he was a leader who had genuine sympathies for the masses of men.

Beyond these few qualities, sketchily revealed, what do we know of the personality of Jesus? His boyhood and youth are a blank.

(The story of his boyhood revelations of wisdom in the Temple is almost undoubtedly a legend like all the other legends of childhood miracles that have grown up about religious leaders of the East.) We do not even know whether Jesus had the respect of his neighbors as an upright workman. Nazareth did not recognize his ability, for he was driven from the streets when he did not perform a miracle in his own city.

During his ministry Jesus showed practically no knowledge which it would not be possible to gain in an ordinary Galilean town. He makes no reference to any of the great Greek thinkers who had lived before him. He made no attempt, so far as we know, to record his teachings in a clear and forceful way.

The personality of Jesus can be better understood by comparison with any ancient or modern religious leader. There is a peculiar sameness about all the world's great religious leaders in spite of the efforts of the disciples of each to prove the uniqueness of their favorite.

Buddha, for instance, was miraculously conceived and sent forth into the world to preach a gospel of world-renunciation and unselfishness. He came from a very wealthy and powerful family, was converted to his new faith by divine plan and spent the years of his long life preaching, organizing congregations, and serving mankind. The traditions which have grown up around Buddha have made him into an incarnation of the Deity, yet there is no indication that he was anything more than a great teacher. His own religious enthusiasm and the admiration of his followers persuaded him to claim that he was the Perfect One.

The dreamy and superstitious mystics who made Buddha into a Perfect One were not very different from the people who initiated Christianity. The founders of Christianity may have been respected artisans in their various homes, but they were no more intelligent in the science of universal thinking than the inhabitants of the mountains of Tennessee. When we see how easy it is in the modern scientific world to create a Joseph Smith or a Mary Baker Eddy, the power of superstition in the days of almost universal illiteracy can be realized. Religious enthusiasm as it applies to leaders is one of the most undiscerning forces in the world. Even love cannot be so blind.

But the Jesus of the New Testament has an irresistible charm about him which all the delusions of his followers and all the quarreling schools of theologians have not entirely destroyed. As a god he is personally vain and intellectually inadequate. As a passionate,

daring, and hot-headed evangelist he appeals to the virility of all men. He shows that inimitable genius for hearty, democratic fellowship which made him the idol of common folk. He was no half-way prophet: he was no truckler to the rich. He loved the oppressed as much as he hated the oppressor. In him there were combined something of that tenderness and battle-lust which have commanded the loyalty of men in every age.

The personality of Jesus will continue to move men long after organized Christianity has lost its power.

We cannot call him perfect, for he was at times harsh and haughty, at times provincial and ignorant, and at times inordinately vain. We cannot call him God, for every fact of modern science and the now generally accepted theory of evolution make it impossible that the infinite, progressive Force of the Universe should have been entirely expressed in a Palestinian Jew who lived hundreds of years ago. But Jesus had that invincible determination to speak the truth and that unflinching courage of the martyr which will always make him a leader of magnetic power.

The chief controversies of recent years have centered around the teachings of Jesus rather than his personality. What can we accept and what must we reject in those teachings?

I believe that the chief sin of the clergy is in refusing to define for themselves and their congregations the part of Jesus's teachings which they *cannot* accept. We would not call a man a good follower of Mohammed if he rejected three-fourths of the prophet's leading teachings and accepted only that which accorded with his own ideas of what a religion should be. Yet that is precisely what the American clergy is doing with the teachings of Jesus.

In my last reading of the gospels I noted how much of Jesus's time was consumed in preaching about the coming of the kingdom of God. The ideal which he held before men was a worthy one, but we cannot honestly believe in it to-day. Jesus believed in a kingdom which was coming almost *immediately*, a kingdom whose coming should be preceded by a terrible judgment-day in which his followers should be weeded out from all the unbelievers among men and exalted to the throne of God. The conviction of the early coming of that kingdom is apparent in every sermon that Jesus preached and in the interpretation put upon his gospel by all his disciples from John the Baptist to Paul. "And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring. . . .

Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass away, till all be fulfilled." (Luke xxi.)

"For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even to the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. . . . Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken: and then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

"Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh: So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors. VERILY I SAY UNTO YOU, THIS GENERATION SHALL NOT PASS TILL ALL THESE THINGS BE FULFILLED." (Matt. xxiv.)

Modern teachers have glossed over the words of Jesus concerning the kingdom and made it seem that he intended a kingdom of justice and righteousness here upon earth, and nothing more. But Jesus had a very different ideal in mind. He definitely predicted again and again a *physical* kingdom here upon earth which should be accomplished by a miraculous disruption of Nature by the hand of God. We cannot identify the kingdom of moral life which we seek to establish through personal and social reconstruction with the star-falling-cloud-charioted arrival of Jesus.

We know now that Jesus was wrong when he predicted that the world would come to a cataclysmic end within one generation, but preachers still attribute to Jesus the intelligence which modern science has given them. They continually evade the plain and undeniable fact that Jesus was wrong in the chief doctrine of his gospel. They denounce those street preachers and fanatics of all sorts who use the Bible to predict the early end of the world, when the truth is that those street preachers are maintaining the gospel of Jesus in its purity more conscientiously than our leading theologians.

The fact that Jesus expected the early end of the world throws a new light upon all his ethical teachings. The morality of the last week of the world would necessarily be quite different from the morality of the three-millionth week in a series of 98,783,521,306. . . weeks. A man can quite readily love his neighbors if he knows



that all their life interests and rivalries are to be wiped out in the next week, and they are both to become part of a kingdom of brotherhood. Such a man need "take no thought for the morrow." Such a man can turn the other cheek with the silent assurance: "My God will reward me for this goodness when I arrive in his kingdom next week. Why should I concern myself with anything but the saving of my own soul and the souls of my friends?"

So the Sermon on the Mount which embodies some of the great moral ideals of the race is quite impossible as a program of moral conduct in a world which may never end because it is inspired by the conviction that the meek, the hungry, the persecuted, and the sorrowful will be relieved of their troubles not by scientific betterment but by the supernatural charity of the coming kingdom. Reverse every one of the beatitudes and you have the moral code which rules our American business life, not because our business life is altogether horrible but because it is based on the assumption of permanence.

A more serious charge can be made against the teachings of Jesus than anything I have yet mentioned. We have come to believe in our modern life that we are saved by character rather than belief. It is not right that any man should be stamped with the approval of the gods merely because he accepts an explanation of life presented by some one else. A man's value to the world is generally measured by the amount of service he renders to the community.

The teachings of Jesus emphasize above everything else in the salvation of the race the acceptance of himself as Divine Saviour. John does not say, "For God so loved the world that he sent to the world a great example of unselfish service that whosoever labored in his spirit should gain eternal life." Rather it is written, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever BELIEVETH in him should not perish but have everlasting life."

John iii. 16 expresses the heart of Christianity. I am not one of those intellectual jugglers who try to dodge this point. And the experience of the human race shows that when we make salvation dependent upon the acceptance of facts concerning a religious personality, we undermine the very foundation of moral life. When I can be saved by believing right, there is no earthly use in doing right. When I allow theological views to be a condition of salvation I ignore those economic and social forces which really save people. I might think that Jesus was an impostor and a lunatic

and that belief would not affect my salvation if I sincerely devoted myself to my own highest ideals.

I have never met half a dozen men who seriously accepted the Christian standard of salvation, i. e., all men who reject the belief in Jesus's unique sonship will be eternally damned and all men who accept will live eternally. The Church has too much sense to accept it, so it adds on to the standard certain moral laws which entirely change its meaning. It is an abomination to intelligence to say that the living goodness of an active race was summed up in a historical figure who lived two thousand years ago. Goodness is not a stagnant thing. It moves forward with the relentless progress of a Juggernaut, and is so much bigger than the personality of Jesus or any prophet that it is hard to believe that some men still hold the old belief.

There is but one choice in this matter. If the goodness of mankind grows from century to century, then Jesus cannot be our infallible moral guide. Every principle of modern science points to the fact that mankind is growing forward in the attempt to solve the great riddle of salvation, and that moral laws must not be bound down to any one personality. Personalities are but incidents in the growth of moral systems. Jesus may have given expression to the most sublime moral ideals of the race but the truth of those ideals does not depend upon him.

The People and not any one Person shall teach me what to do. When religious leaders try to fasten my moral judgment to a teacher who lived many hundreds of years ago, they show complete ignorance of the nature of my moral decisions.

Jesus as an inspirer of unselfish conduct will always interest me. Jesus as a divine authority in conduct will stultify my conscience and make me a moral child.

The problem of Jesus and the salvation of the world is greatly complicated by teachers who make over Jesus to suit their ideals. Like a dreamer before a magic mirror Bernard Shaw has looked into the story of Christianity and beheld a Fabian economist born in Bethlehem. With the vivid coloring of a powerful imagination Bouck White in *The Call of the Carpenter* has put himself back into Judea. The pictorial power of these writers is so great that thousands have been convinced of the true modernness of Jesus.

Would that I too could be convinced. The Jesus of Bernard Shaw or Bouck White is infinitely more compelling than any prophet of the Scriptures. But the New Testament is too much for me.

The Jesus of the New Testament is distinctly a product of his

time, and his time was ignorant and superstitious. If he gave an economic gospel to his time, his disciples never heard of it, and they saw much more of him than Bernard Shaw or Bouck White ever did. Jesus was known as the mystic, the dreamer, the prophet, the wonder-worker, but never as the master sociologist. How could his mind be occupied with the adjustment of society when that society was to end in an earthquake within the generation?

Palestine two thousand years ago could not have produced the master of sociology any more than the stone age could have produced Plato. Judea wanted a message of personal faith and salvation, and Jesus was sensitive enough and able enough to feel the need and supply the message. If he had spoken the thoughts of modern socialism or any kind of socialism, his people would have looked on in dumb stupidity. The real message of Jesus stands there in the New Testament, full of gross superstition and ignorance, forever damning the efforts of enthusiasts to make it over into a message of practical social reform.

For a long time the Church has been too sane to preach pure Christianity—I mean the teachings of Jesus in their entirety. We brush aside those teachings which the twentieth century cannot accept and preach those “essentials” which our time demands. Whatever we agree with is branded as an essential of Jesus’s teachings. The unthinking observer imagines that we are really preaching Christianity. We are preaching what we want to preach. *We* and not Jesus are the authorities of our moral teaching.

Many a critic standing on the outside of the Church makes his mistake here. He imagines that the real strength of the Church is based upon the teachings of Jesus. Listen to Nietzsche in this bitter attack:

“When on a Sunday morning we hear the old bells ringing, we ask ourselves: Is it possible? All this for a Jew crucified two thousand years ago who said he was God’s son? The proof of such an assertion was lacking. . . . Certainly the Christian religion constitutes in our time a protruding bit of antiquity from very remote ages and that its assertions are still generally believed. . . . although men have become so keen in the scrutiny of claims. . . . constitutes the oldest relic of this inheritance. A god who begets children by a mortal woman; a sage who demands that no more work be done, that no more justice be administered but that the signs of the approaching end of the world be heeded; a system of justice that accepts an innocent as a vicarious sacrifice in the place of the guilty; a person who bids his disciples drink his blood; prayers for

miracles ; sins against a god expiated against a god ; fear of a hereafter to which death is the portal ; the figure of a cross as a symbol in an age that no longer knows the purpose and the ignominy of the cross—how ghostly all these things flit by before us out of the grave of their primitive antiquity ! Is one to believe that such things can still be believed ?”

The church bells of our own day do not mean that all these things are being taken seriously inside the churches. The preachers present their own moral views before the people and manage to discover a text from the Bible to hang their sermon upon with several ringing quotations for good measure. They use the name of Jesus to support their analysis of life in the same way that a politician uses the name of Lincoln in his peroration. Their resemblance to Jesus is as marked as the resemblance of the average politician to the Great Emancipator.

There are many men (commonly called cynics) who see these truths but who refuse to attack the Church or the personality of Jesus because they are bound up with everything that is ideal in our civilization.

“Of what importance is it to us,” they ask, “that Jesus was not what the world believed him to be? His teachings are doing much good in the world and the churches are uplifting men in his name.”

But how fatal it is to build a religion upon a fundamental fraud ! If Jesus is not the actual saviour of the world why should we face backward to a personality and teachings that the world has outgrown ?

There cannot be two Christs in my life. If my conscience, alert and sensitive to modern needs, is to be my guide then the conscience of the Judean teacher can be of only reference value. And does not the advance of knowledge mean this, that in place of the rulership of popes and kings and Christs there shall be substituted the supremacy of a man’s own moral reason ?

My moral reason is my Christ and ever will be. In the light of that moral reason I meet Jesus of Nazareth as a peculiar and mysterious acquaintance. I am cordial in my admiration at those few times when our souls seem to find common ground. I sympathize with him in defeat and rejoice in his victories. I am thankful of the good things which he has given me and scornful of his almost insane egotism. Earnestly I listen to his words, for he is a fellow pilgrim on life’s way.

Then I pass on to win salvation for myself.