

**THE TONE AND TEACHING OF THE
NEW TESTAMENT ON CERTAINTY
IN RELIGION. BEING THE
MERCHANTS' LECTURE FOR
OCTOBER 1880**

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The Tone and Teaching of the New Testament on Certainty in Religion. Being the Merchants' Lecture for October 1880 by Edward White

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EDWARD WHITE

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BEING THE MERCHANTS' LECTURE FOR OCTOBER, 1880.

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PREFATORY NOTE.

THE following discourses were delivered in the present year at the King's Weigh House Chapel, Fish Street Hill, as the October noon-day course of the 208th annual series of "The *Merchants' Lecture*," an ancient foundation among the London Nonconformists. They are published at the request of some gentlemen who heard them, and who thought them likely to be servicable in print.

They contain little beyond an enlargement of Bishop Butler's observation in the *Analogy*; that "the establishment of the Jewish and Christian religions, which were contemporary with the miracles related to be wrought in attestation of both, or subsequent to them, are, as events, just what we should have expected, upon supposition such miracles were really wrought to attest the truth of those religions. These miracles are a satisfactory account of those events—of which no other satisfactory account can be given—*nor any account at all, but what is imaginary merely and invented.* It is to be added that the most obvious, the most easy and direct account of this history, how

it came to be written, and to be received in the world, is *that it really is so*; nor can any other account of it be easy and direct."—Part ii., chap. 7.

Mr. Justice Fitzjames Stephen, indeed, has told us (*Contemporary Review*, March, 1874) that "the general and early diffusion of the belief in the history of Jesus Christ appears, to him, to prove little more as to the truth of the history than is proved by the eagerness with which it is accepted, and the warmth with which it is believed, in the present day. Both prove only, but superabundantly, how strong a hold Christian doctrine has on *a certain class of minds*, and how much they are attracted by the history and the character of Christ, but they prove no more."

This mode of setting aside the "anecdotes reported of Jesus Christ," proceeds on apparent forgetfulness of this fact, that *all* true histories are based on contemporary recollections, or on "anecdotal" memoirs written shortly after the events; and that the contents of the four Gospels must be considered not only in connection with early *Christian* belief, but with ancient and contemporary *Jewish* belief on the coming of the predicted Messiah. The "class of minds" which, alike in the first and in the nineteenth centuries, have generally believed most firmly in Jesus as the Christ

are not mere sentimentalists, but those who from moral and intellectual qualifications are precisely the best fitted to judge of the value of the evidence.

Bishop Fitzgerald, in a remarkable paper, forming the 29th number of the *Cautions for the Times*, and which Archbishop Whately—the editor—speaks of as “one of the finest compositions in our language,” retorts upon those who charge credulity upon Christian believers in the following sentences:—

“The miraculous occurrences recorded in the Bible are indeed extraordinary, and wonderful, and in themselves, improbable; but all of them put together are as nothing, in point of strangeness, compared with the only alternative,—with what must be believed by anyone who should thereupon resolve to reject those miraculous narratives. That a handful of Jewish peasants and fishermen should undertake to abolish the religions of the whole civilized world, and introduce a new one, in defiance of all the prejudices, and all the power of the world, arrayed against them; that they should think to effect this by pretending to miraculous power *which they did not, and knew that they did not, possess*; and that they should succeed in the attempt; all this is surely many times more incredible than anything and everything recorded in

our Scriptures. And no one should make a boast of his 'incredulity' in disbelieving something that is very strange, while he is believing—as the only alternative—something incomparably *more* strange."—page 511.

I gladly embrace the present opportunity of commending to the reader's attention the work of Dr. Peter Bayne, on *The testimony of Christ to Christianity*; where, in a small space, he will find the question of Christ's intellectual and moral authority, as a witness to the reality of His own miracles, handled with rare insight, delicacy, and eloquence.

It remains only to add that although in some parts of these lectures, where it was required by the argument, I have adhered to the useful distinction, referred to in the opening sentences, between Certainty and Certitude—in the sense respectively of *truth in propositions, (considered as representing the reality of things)*,—and *a state of the mind supposed to correspond with that reality*, in other portions I have readily fallen into the popular usage, which regards them as interchangeable expressions to denote subjectively the state of the mind only.

E. W.

December 1, 1880.