

THE RELIGIOUS BELIEF OF SHAKESPEARE

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The religious belief of Shakespeare by John Donnan Countermine

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JOHN DONNAN COUNTERMINE

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"I believed, and therefore have I spoken." Did Shakespeare believe? If he believed, did he speak? If he spoke, did he speak so as to be understood? Can we, from what he said, discover his religious belief? What is it to believe? What are the mental and spiritual faculties that are brought into exercise when a person believes?

Looking at the word believe in the light of a clear analysis, we discover that it has, first, a receptive capacity. "Christ came unto His own, and His own received Him not, but as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name."

Religious Belief of Shakespeare

John 1 : 11, 12. Here the words believe and receive are used interchangeably. To receive is to believe. To believe is to receive. When a person believes, according to this analytical conception of the word, he receives something which he did not have before. A new element or force enters into his life which more or less influences him one way or another. Thus to believe on Christ is to receive Christ in His threefold office, as a prophet, priest, and king. Did Shakespeare do this? Did he receive Christ? What attitude did he take towards the Bible? The Bible is the great text-book of Christianity. Did he believe the Bible and thus receive Christ as his Prophet? Did he accept the Scriptural doctrine of the atonement, and thus receive Christ as his great High Priest? Did he bow to

Religious Belief of Shakespeare

the authority of Christ's teachings and thus accept Him as his King? These questions, so important and interesting, we hope to answer in this discussion.

Looking again at the word believe, we discover, in the second place, that it has not only a receptive, but also an assimilating capacity. What a person believes and thereby receives, he assimilates. It enters in and becomes part of his thought and life. "Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises : that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature." 2 Peter 1 : 4. "Now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He shall appear we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And every man that hath this hope in Him purifieth himself, even as He is pure." 1 John 3 : 2, 3.

Religious Belief of Shakespeare

Here is the assimilating process. It is gradual, constant, effective. "Changed into the same image, from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord." 2 Cor. 3: 18. Did Shakespeare have any such experience? Were his last days different from what were the days of his youth and young manhood? Did he grow more kind, attractive, loving, mellow? This is the way a Christian grows. Was Shakespeare a Christian? Read his last plays and see. Read "The Tempest," "Cymbeline," and "Winter's Tale." Here we see Shakespeare as we are always wont to see the true child of God. A deep seriousness has come over his life. He is a different man from what he was. He is living in retirement and hence pours out his soul in deeper, and if possible, more impressive religious tones.

Religious Belief of Shakespeare

The third element which we find in the word believe is energy. Read the eleventh chapter of Hebrews and see how true this is. "This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith." 1 John 5:4. Did Shakespeare have faith? Did this mighty grace stir his soul and energize his life? "Faith without works is dead, being alone." Jas. 2: 17. "By their fruits ye shall know them." Matt. 7: 15. Judged by this rule did Shakespeare have faith? We shall see. But why ask these questions? What difference does it make to us whether Shakespeare was a believer or an agnostic? a Christian, or an infidel? Much every way, but chiefly because he was, first, a great man, a great thinker, a great logician, a great poet, a great dramatist. He had a wonderful mind. A deep, keen