

**THREE DISCOURSES  
ON THE RELIGION  
OF REASON**

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Three discourses on the religion of reason by Gerrit Smith

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# THE RELIGION OF REASON.

A DISCOURSE BY GERRIT SMITH.

IN PETERBORO, FEB. 21ST, 1868.

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WORD has gone out that I am this day to present a new religion; and hence no doubt this unusually large assembly. It is indeed a new religion that I am to present; and yet it is an old one. It is old, and yet it is new. It is the same religion which was preached and lived by Jesus Christ more than eighteen centuries ago. It is the same "faith which was once delivered unto the saints." Thus old is this religion: and yet so little is it preached and apprehended, that it well deserves to be called a new one.

I see, my neighbors, that you are disappointed. You came to this place with your curiosity highly excited to hear about a new religion: and it turns out that I am to tell you of but the old one. I have put a damper upon your raised expectations by announcing for my theme the old religion of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, is it not a new religion to many of *you*? The commandment that "ye love one another," was in point of fact an old one: and yet Jesus said: "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another." To those whom He addressed it was new.

Do I stir the indignation of some of you by intimating that you are not accustomed to hear the religion of Jesus preached? But when and where do you hear it preached? "Every Sunday," say you. "In all the churches," say you. Well, if this is so, I confess that I am not so fortunate as you are. For very rarely do I hear it. You tell me that the clergymen of this neighborhood preach it. These are good men. I love and

honor them : and I doubt not that they are all in the way to heaven. But if I understand them, it is not the religion of Jesus which they preach. They preach in favor of creeds and churches and a clerical order of men. So mistaken are they, as still to believe that Jesus came to establish all these :—whereas He came to send them all down stream. Blind are they still to the fact, that when His religion shall have come to prevail over the whole earth, there will not one church creed be left ; no, nor one clergyman ; no, nor one church in the present and popular sense of the word.

A religious creed is proper. Every man should have one. But a church creed is improper. Fifty or a hundred people in Peterboro or Cazenovia, however much alike in their views and spirit, should no more be required to adopt a common religious creed than to shorten or stretch out their bodies to a common length.

There is a sad misconception in regard to a church also. The common idea is, that to make a church people must come together and organize, much as in the case of a Mutual Insurance Company. This is the way a Sectarian church is made. But Jesus no more thought of providing for a sectarian church than for a political party. In His eye the Christians of a place are the church of the place : and this too whether they know it or not, will it or not. They are such by force of their character : and votes can neither make nor unmake the fact.

As to the clerical order. Many clergymen are among the best of men. Nevertheless such an order is wholly unauthorized and exceedingly pernicious. Their assumption of an exclusive right to teach religion makes the teachers conceited, dogmatic, arrogant, tyrannical ; and their hearers lazy in mind and slavish in spirit.

The plea for a clerical order is that men learned in religion are needed to teach it. This however is a pagan idea, that has come down to us. To be able to teach a pagan religion—to explain its mysteries and superstitions and absurdities—does indeed require much study of books and much cabalistic learning. Somewhat so is it in the case of the Hebrew religion also. But the religion taught by Jesus is not a letter but a life. So simple is it that the unlearned can both understand and teach it. Even fishermen He pronounced fit to preach His religion. Ay,

little children can comprehend it. "Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise," says Jesus. "I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth," says He, "that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes." Wise and good men are the teachers in many theological seminaries. Emphatically true is this in the case of the one in our own county. Nevertheless a theological seminary is a mistake. This it is because the current religion is a mistake. The true religion is too simple to make the training of a theological seminary necessary for those who teach it. We should allow the wisdom and goodness of God to assure us that the religion which He has given to the world must correspond in its simplicity with the simplicity of the masses.

Let it not be supposed from what I have said, that I object to the pastorship. Every church should have at least one pastor. He may or may not however have many of the gifts of a preacher.

Every true church of Christ is a simple democracy. Such practically were the primitive churches. Its ordinary assemblies should be mere conferences in which all persons, male or female, are to feel entirely free to speak as the spirit moves them. In this wise are they capable, without having any other preachers than those of their own body, to edify the church, and to glorify God. No Christian should doubt his right to open his lips on such occasions. Faith in Christ is the warrant to speak for Christ. "I believed," says Paul, "and therefore have I spoken." But in addition to this means of grace and growth within themselves, the collective churches should have and should liberally support a powerful itinerant ministry: and this I can say without being inconsistent with what I have said of the simplicity of Christ's religion. The Pauls and Barnabases of modern times should travel among the churches, as did the Pauls and Barnabases of ancient times. The obscurest country church should be favored, as often as every month or two, with a discourse from a Finney, a Beecher, a Lucretia Mott, an Angelina Weld, a Chapin, a Parker, a Beriah Green, an Alonzo Potter, or an Abram Pryne.

But I proceed to add to my reasons for declaring that the clergymen of this neighborhood do not preach the religion of



Jesus. They do not preach it—for they preach that salvation turns on believing in the “doctrines.” I am not blaming them for teaching the divinity of Christ, the atonement, an eternal hell, and the plenary inspiration of the Bible. What I blame them for, is their teaching that they who do not understand and receive these doctrines must perish. I might admit that Jesus taught all these doctrines. But where did He teach that if a man does not understand and receive them, he shall perish? He taught that at the close of this earthly drama men are to be judged by their lives. The great decisive question then will be—not what were your doctrines, but what were your deeds? How did you acquit yourself in regard to those simple duties, opportunities for doing which crowd the whole pathway of both high and humble life, even from childhood to the grave? Did you feed the hungry, and clothe the naked, and welcome the stranger, and visit the sick and the prisoner? In perfect and beautiful consistency with these interrogatories is the Saviour’s declaration: “By their fruits ye shall know them;” and also the Apostles’: “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is to visit the widow and the fatherless in their affliction.”

False tests of character do our clerical neighbors apply in their trying of us by “the doctrines.” In reference to good King Josiah, Jeremiah says: “He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well with him: was not this to know me? saith the Lord.” Says Micah: “What doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, and love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” And how emphatically does Jesus make the life the test when He says: “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you do ye even so to them.” It is honesty, that He enjoins in these words. To be honest is to be a Christian. The most honest man on earth is the best Christian on earth. It is indeed the most comprehensive honesty, that is here required. The spirit, which dwelt in Jesus, can alone inspire it: and strangers are we to that spirit until we are born again. Radical must be the change in our fallen and depraved nature, ere a thorough and gospel honesty can characterize us. I say *fallen* nature. Let me remark that I do not entertain the common views of this subject. Owing to ancestral violations of moral as well as physical and intellectual

laws, we inherit a constitution morally as well as physically and intellectually impaired. This is all I mean by a fallen nature, adding thereto what we may ourselves have done to degrade it.

The clergymen of our neighborhood believe and inculcate that little can be done for a man until he has become thoroughly instructed in and entirely converted to that whole form of doctrine which they regard as vital. This step taken, and his next is to conform his life to the teaching. Now I admit that the creed exerts an influence upon the life:—but it is not so great as that which the life exerts upon the creed. The creed should be left to grow out of the life rather than the life out of the creed. Let a man set out to deal more justly and lovingly with all his fellow men, and he will soon find himself forming a creed, which corresponds with his improved course of life. As his life becomes increasingly pure and beautiful, so will his creed become increasingly sound and comprehensive. In saying that the life influences the creed more than the creed the life, I am justified by the Saviour's declaration: "If any man will do his will he shall know of the doctrine." It is mainly in doing right that we get a right creed.

But it is said that Jesus requires faith, and makes it the condition of salvation. Faith in what? In the doctrines on which our clergymen harp habitually?—I ask again—where does He teach that the want of such faith is fatal? "However this may be," reply our clergymen, "He nevertheless makes faith in Himself essential." I admit it. He says: "If ye believe not that I am He, ye shall die in your sins." But just here comes up the great question—what is it to believe in Christ? Is it to believe in "the doctrines?" If so, then the millions of good men, who had never heard of them, nor even of Christ, and the millions too of good men who, having heard of them, had nevertheless mistaken conceptions of them, have perished. But as sure as God is just and merciful, all good men, live and die they in whatever ignorance of the person of Christ or of "the doctrines," are saved. What then is it to believe in Christ? I answer that such belief in its very highest sense is faith in justice, sincerity, mercy, love, and the other moral qualities of which man, be he in Christendom or heathendom, has instinctive knowledge, and for his growth in which, be he in Christendom or

heathendom, he is responsible. These are the qualities, which make up that sum of truth which Jesus came into our world to live to honor and die to magnify: and of which He declares Himself to be the impersonation when He says: "I am the way, the truth and the life." This is the truth of which He spake when He said to Pilate: "To this end was I born and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth." I repeat that to believe in Jesus in the very highest sense is to believe in those virtues which were all clustered in His perfect character: and moreover it is to believe in them so cordially and so constantly as to make them our own, and to prove that they are our own by their blossoms and fruits in our lives. Our lives and our likeness to Christ are the precise measure of our faith in Christ.

I am well aware how contrary to the common view of it is this view of faith in Christ. As is generally held, right apprehensions—adoring, melting thoughts—of His person and personal character constitute pre-eminently true faith in Christ. I would not undervalue such apprehensions and thoughts. He who has them not, even though the life and death of Christ are clearly before him, can give no satisfactory proof that he appreciates the truths which Christ came to teach and illustrate, and no satisfactory proof that he welcomes the duties which He came to enjoin. Nevertheless the Saviour does Himself admit that men may mistake Him and yet be safe. "Whosoever," says He, "speaketh a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him." That is, he shall not be safe who mistakes in regard to the spirit and essence—the soul and substance of religion. If men may err in regard to Christ and yet be forgiven, it nevertheless does not follow that they shall be forgiven, who live in the denial of those vital truths, which the Spirit of God teaches in every heart.

I said that our clergymen make the doctrine of the plenary inspiration of the Bible essential to salvation; and that in so doing they preach not the religion of Christ. But are they not also in error in respect to the fact of such inspiration?

The Bible is really the best book in the world: though the present uses of it make it practically the worst. All other books put together are, not so much as the Bible is, the occasion of