

**TALKS
ABOUT JESUS**

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Talks about Jesus by M. J. Savage

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M. J. SAVAGE

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ABOUT JESUS**

TALKS ABOUT JESUS.

BY
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AUTHOR OF "LIGHT ON THE CLOUD," "THE MORALS OF EVOLUTION," ETC

SECOND EDITION.

(Corrected.)

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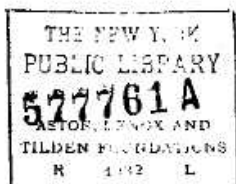
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INTRODUCTION.

We have had no end of discussion over the questions, Who are Christians? and What is Christianity? And, so long as the present indefinite methods are followed, there is no apparent reason why there ever should be any end. No first principles or fixed starting-point being held in common, each one chooses his own premises, according to the law of affinity, and then sails easily on to the conclusion he prefers. While very satisfactory to one party, it naturally has little effect on the other. Beecher said, some years ago, that most people go through the Bible like a magnet through a dish of sand containing iron filings, and "come out of it with the texts they like sticking all over them." No better illustration of this can be found than the current discussion about Christianity. Let us see if there is not a method, or a few principles, that all intelligent and honest persons must accord as guides.

To the Catholic, the ultimate authority is the Church. The Church's word is as divine as any recorded utterance of Jesus himself. And, in any case, it is the Church that must decide what Jesus meant, what the Apostles meant, and what the Fathers meant. To a Catholic, then, Christianity is what the Church, in the properly constituted way, pronounces it to be.

When we come to the Orthodox Protestant, the matter at first sight would seem to be equally clear. The Bible is held to be infallibly inspired, and Christianity is simply what the Bible declares it to be. But now we are met with an element of confusion. The principle of Protestantism asserts the "right of private judgment" as to what the Bible means; and the history of Prot-

estantism shows plainly that it is capable of meaning a good many different things. All the Bible is of equal authority to a man consistently Orthodox: therefore he does not feel compelled to construct his Christian system entirely, or even mainly, out of the actual history and teaching of Jesus. And, as a matter of fact, the larger part of the material is found in the words of Paul.

But now we come to a third position. Many Orthodox writers and preachers—with perhaps a questionable consistency—and all “Liberal Christians” have come to the point of saying that the highest and only ultimate authority in this matter is Jesus himself. They say, “We will pass by the self-constituted interpreters and ushers, and press on to the inner court, and listen to what the Master himself has to say.”

This latter position sounds logical and easy. It is certainly the one that seems most rational. If Jesus had any definite purpose, and tried to teach a particular thing, he probably not only knew what it was, but also gave utterance to it. If he knew anything that it was essential to man’s welfare that man should know, and did not speak it, we may most certainly feel entitled to question his “good-will toward man.” I think, then, that we may take it for granted that he said what he thought ought to be said.

The next question is, Can we find out what he really did say?

To clear the way for an answer, a few things must be premised.

1. We know that the disciples misunderstood, and so misinterpreted, many things he said while he was with them. It is only natural to suppose that they did the same after his death. For example, Paul, our earliest witness,—for his letters were written before either of the “Gospels”—speaks of the possibility of his having been charged with baptizing *in his own name*. Of course this would have been simply absurd, had it been known—as in Matt. xxviii., 19—that Jesus had left on authoritative record the regular church formula for that ordinance. Again, if the disciples had known that, in the same explicit manner, Jesus had commanded them to “disciple all nations,” the early and bitter dispute as to the admission of the Gentiles to the Church could

by no possibility ever have arisen. Some parts of the record, then, we know cannot be correct.

2. We must pass wholly by the so-called Gospel of John. We need not dogmatically deny the traditional authorship. But the fact that we cannot always tell whether it is "John" or Jesus who is speaking; and the further fact, that even Orthodox critics—like Prof. Robertson Smith and Dr. Edwin A. Abbott, in their articles in the last edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*—either doubt or deny the Johannine authorship, compel us to leave this book out of account when we are trying to be sure as to what Jesus really said.

3. The same Orthodox Prof. Smith,—together with almost all competent and unbiassed critics,—admits that even Mark, Matthew, and Luke, are only "unapostolic digests" of earlier traditions as to what Jesus was, did, and said. It is now pretty well settled that Mark is the oldest of the first three Gospels. The *Encyclopedia Britannica's* article of Dr. Abbott considers this conclusively proved. The reader is referred to his article (Gospels) for the method and force of that proof. And even Mark was not finished in its present shape for many years after the crucifixion.

4. Mark contains only twenty-eight verses not also contained in either Matthew or Luke. The problem of the relations of these three Gospels to each other is now explained by the existence of a more or less fixed and settled tradition that preceded the composition of either of them, and to which they all had access.

5. These three—the synoptics, or the Gospels that *see together*—have a very large element, a tradition in common, beside the additions which are peculiar to each. *This common element represents so much of the tradition as had already become so fixed that neither of the writers felt at liberty to change it.* Each one added to this other things he had heard and considered true. But of course the threefold testimony has a weight of authority not possessed by either one alone. This common element—the triple tradition—is so large that a complete life of Jesus can be constructed by using only those words and phrases which all three of the synoptics use in common. The addition to this