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# ESSENTIAL CHRISTIANITY

BY

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## Essential Christianity

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ABRAHAM MITRIE RIHBANY

RELIGION IS NOT MERELY A MATTER OF KNOWLEDGE, BUT THE WAY OF LIFE. If we study the history of religion seriously and with perfect freedom and openness of mind, we find that as a rule men do not differ about the essence of religion, but about its forms. The Apostle Paul tells us (Gal. 5:22) "The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control; against these there is no law." The Apostle means that all those in whose lives such fruits appear are not subject to the law of ordinances and to doctrinal disputes, because by their fruits they are known to live the life of the spirit.

Now all men know that these fruits of the spirit are good and are the real riches of human life. Wherever they appear, they are recognized as the manifestations of a good inner life, and that they are one in essence in all the races of men. What men really differ and quarrel about and hate one

another for are the FORMS OF DOCTRINE and not the ESSENCE OF RELIGION. They have differed on the forms of baptism, on whether leavened or unleavened bread should be used in the Lord's Supper, on definitions of Christ's nature, the forms of the Cross, and other similar externalities. Free Christianity does not say that all such forms should be rejected, or that any one single form should be adopted by all worshippers. It only says that religion is something deeper and more vital than all such external means.

Free Christians believe that the essential message of the Gospel is a call to spiritual living, and not a structure of speculative doctrine. Said the Lord Jesus (John 10:10) "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." He does not say, "I am come that they may have many doctrines, or one authoritative doctrine, and fight one another because of such doctrines." No doubt he knew that men must differ about forms, but his purpose was and is that all such differences should be made subject to the vastly greater purpose of life itself. In his great beatitudes Jesus speaks also of this law of life. Let us listen to his words (Matt. 5:3-9) "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they

that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God."

In all these great utterances, the Master does not say, "Blessed are those who believe many doctrines, or those who think their own doctrine is the only true one, or those who are baptized after one form or another." No; his words are LIFE and not doctrine.

There are many Christians who think that the test of a Christian's faith is the amount of praise he gives Jesus' name and the number of miracles he believes in. We hold that the name of Jesus is worthy of our praise, and reverence for him should be the joy of every Christian. Men are free also to believe in miracles, if through such a belief one feels himself surrounded by spiritual forces. Not all men, however, can believe alike as regards such matters. Jesus himself attached very little significance to mere belief in any form. Here are his words (Matt. 7:21-23) "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my

Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity."

In these sayings Jesus tells us that those who praised him much and called him "Lord, Lord," were not those whom he considered to be his real followers, nor those who even WORKED miracles and not only believed in them. The doing of the will of the Father as Jesus did it himself—by living a pure, brave, unselfish life and doing good to all men—is the way to the kingdom of God. Nor does Jesus say that only in one denomination can men do the will of the Father. "He that doeth the will of my Father," not in any one Church, or according to the teaching of any one Creed, but anywhere and everywhere in the world.

Human experience, also, witnesses to the truth of Jesus' sayings, and against the claims of those who think that their own form of faith is the only true one. Heretofore every Christian sect has made such a claim. But the fact is that even the members of the same denomination do not love and trust one another, simply because they all profess one creed.

It is a sad fact that in many cases men have suffered most from members of their own church. Bad men as well as good men are found in all denominations, regardless of those denominations' beliefs. Men always love, trust, and reverence, not the man who says "I believe this and that doctrine"; not the man who cries "Lord, Lord," but him who DOES the will of God, whose life yields "the fruits of the spirit." Such persons are accepted by Christ, because they live the Christ life. They have within them the foregleams of immortality. They may be baptized by immersion or sprinkling, they may use leavened or unleavened bread in the Lord's Supper, and may be called Catholics, Protestants, Presbyterians, Methodist or Unitarian; IF THEY WALK BY THE SPIRIT AND SHOW THE FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT IN THEIR LIVES THEY ARE LOVED BY MEN AND ACCEPTED WITH GOD.

It is this Christian faith that free Christians hold and teach. We feel that the different Christian bodies have held in practice that the forms of religion were more important than its essence. They have given themselves to disputations over the externals of religion and thus strengthened hatred rather than love between them. If all the sermons that have been preached on baptism had been devoted to CHARACTER, and if all the books that have been

written on the "two natures" of Christ and the usages in Church service and the authority of creed and council had dealt with BROTHERLY LOVE and the brotherhood of man, Christians would not be today fighting and killing one another. They could have had the creeds and usages which the various groups desired to have and at the same time remained friends and worked together for the bringing of the kingdom of God on the earth.

We accept Christ and his teaching. He is our spiritual leader and God's chief revelation to the world. We love the Christian religion, but we do not hate any other religion. BECAUSE we love our religion and our Christ, we would be the friends and helpers of all men. Christ teaches us love and not hatred. He asks us to teach all men, and not to despise and hate them. The seekers of God in all nations and religions are our fellow workers. The Apostle Peter says (Acts 10: 34) "Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons; but in every nation he that feareth him and worketh righteousness, is acceptable to him." This we believe with all our hearts. We believe that the adherents of every religion should teach one another, "speaking the truth in love." They should seek the good and true wherever they may be found. For love, truth

and righteousness are one and the same in all the world.

This is the thing which our present age most urgently needs. Unity and not division; love and not hatred; peace and not war. The world has suffered enough from religious contentions. Many of the causes of those contentions are inherited misconceptions and prejudices which are out of harmony with the modern spirit. It is time for intelligent persons to THINK about their religion, and not simply to accept it as an inheritance. The word of the past was FIXITY, the word of the present is PROGRESS. Progress is a thing of the spirit and demands a change in the form of expression with every advance. It demands liberation from the narrow creeds which were constructed in periods of history whose ideals differed widely from those of the present.

In the past each religious communion, like each nation, considered itself to be the only divinely appointed church to conquer and rule the world. But the nineteen hundred years of Christian history, have shown clearly that this conception is as incorrect as it is unnatural. All the testimony of history, science and philosophy shows beyond the possibility of doubt that no one form of faith can be acceptable to all men and all races. After so many centuries

of contention and strife no one creed, political or religious, has succeeded in conquering and ruling the whole world. So is it not time therefore for intelligent men to realize that God's method in building up the world is not SAMENESS, but DIVERSITY IN HARMONY?

The nations of the world are learning this lesson at an enormous cost. They are being taught that the divine right to rule the world belongs only to God and to humanity at large, but not to any one nation. Shall the various communions of Christians persist in opposing this divine law by remaining captives of an antiquated idea, and rivals of one another? Is this really the right method for the churches to teach men the precepts of love and harmony and thus lead the nations in the building up of a world-democracy?

Obviously no! Essential Christianity means a "diversity of gifts, but the same spirit;" different churches, but the same purpose; different forms, but one faith and one baptism of the spirit. We cross the borders of creed socially and politically; we form business partnerships and precious friendships, regardless of religious affiliations. Shall the Christian spirit be less generous than the social spirit? Are we to hold the inhuman and most unnatural

view that those whom we love dearly in this world and would give our lives to save, as we are doing in this war, will be doomed in the other world because they do not accept our creed? Do we not by holding such a view make God less generous and less compassionate than ourselves? God forbid that any American young man should ever allow himself to assume such an attitude toward God or man.

The call of the times is for fellowship and co-operation; for friendliness toward all religions and all races. Whoever practices the religion of the Beatitudes, the Gospel parables and the Lord's Prayer; whoever is baptized with the spirit in the heart, whoever loves justice and mercy, and God and his neighbor, regardless of creed and sect, is with us and not against us. We would join ourselves in cordial fellowship with those of our fellow-men anywhere in the world whose purpose is the worship of God and the service of man,—and in our turn we would invite all men everywhere to join with us in this worship and service.