

The Influence of Christ

by W.H. Griffith Thomas

The sermon explores the influence of Jesus Christ on human life and society, highlighting the unique and unparalleled impact of Christianity on the world.

Scripture: Matthew 10:32, Matthew 27:24, Mark 14:56, John 7:46, John 15:13, Acts 1:8, Romans 1:16, Philippians 2:9, Colossians 1:15, Hebrews 13:8

Topics: "Christ's Influence", "Christian Impact"

Description

W.H. Griffith Thomas preaches about the undeniable impact of Jesus Christ throughout history, emphasizing how individuals have had to take sides for or against Him, with indifference being impossible. Various historical figures and scholars, despite not accepting Him as Savior, have acknowledged His uniqueness and influence. The sermon delves into the profound testimonies to Jesus Christ's life, character, and work, highlighting the unparalleled moral and social achievements of Christianity, including its role in transforming societies, elevating the status of women, and abolishing slavery. Additionally, the sermon explores the enduring influence of Jesus Christ in addressing the deepest human struggles such as sin, weakness, and uncertainty about the future, contrasting the limitations of science and philosophy in providing lasting solutions.

Transcript

There are many things in life about which we may be perfectly indifferent. Some are outside the sphere of our interest, others we can entirely ignore, while others again we may hold in solution without coming to any definite opinion. In politics it is not absolutely necessary for all to take sides, and in history there are many questions concerning men and movements as to which we may reserve our judgment. But the remarkable thing about Jesus Christ is that men have invariably had to take sides for or against Him.

Indifference has always been impossible. Men have had to declare themselves either as His friends or as His foes. In considering the question with which we are now concerned, it is therefore valuable to inquire what those have thought of Christ who for any reason have not submitted their lives to Him. The testimony of opponents is often the very best evidence we can obtain of the reality of a life or a movement. It is to the subject of the influence of Christ, as witnessed both by His opponents and also by facts patent to everybody that we now call attention.

We have a remarkable chain of testimony to the impression made by Jesus Christ Himself during His earthly life. Among His contemporaries were those who, when sent to apprehend Him, came back without

their prisoner, saying, "Never man spake like this Man." Men of keen intellect like Pilate and Herod could not find any flaw in His conduct, while at His trial no two witnesses agreed together. Subsequent testimony is in the same direction. Napoleon the Great said that Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne and himself founded empires dependent upon force, while Jesus founded one on love, with the result that millions would die for Him.

I think I understand something of human nature, and I tell you all these were men, and I am a man. None else is like Him - Jesus Christ was more than man. [Quoted in Ballard. Miracles of Unbelief, ch. viii.] Renan said that Jesus was the greatest religious genius that ever lived or will live, that His beauty is eternal, and His reign will never end. Jesus is in every respect unique, and nothing can be compared with Him. Be the unlooked-for phenomena of the future what they may, Jesus will not be surpassed. [Quoted in Ballard.

Miracles of Unbelief, ch. viii.] Strauss calls Him - The highest object we can possibly imagine with respect to religion, the being without whose presence in the mind piety is impossible. [Quoted in Ballard. Miracles of Unbelief, ch. viii.] Rousseau says that - If the life and death of Socrates are those of a philosopher, the life of Jesus Christ are those of a God. [Quoted in Ballard. Miracles of Unbelief, ch. viii.] These are but a few out of many more testimonies that could be adduced to the life and character of Jesus Christ, derived from the writings of those who, in spite of their encomiums, did not accept Him as their Saviour and God.

Scarcely less remarkable is the testimony of great scholars and thinkers to the work of Jesus Christ through the centuries as seen in Christianity. His work began in the place where He was crucified, among His enemies, and if there had been any untruth in the statements of His earliest disciples about Him it could easily have been shown and condemned. But His message made remarkable progress even among His inveterate foes, and it was not long before one of His disciples could say that the Gospel had not only gone through Judea and into Asia Minor, but into all the world.

Not very much later we have the testimony of Tacitus the Roman historian to the progress of Christianity. Then in the second century comes the well-known evidence of Pliny concerning the early Christians who met week by week and worshiped Christ as God, and banded themselves together by an oath not to steal or to be untrue. Then arose the persecutions of the second and third centuries, with the boast of Tertullian that the more the Christians were persecuted, the more numerous they became - "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church" - until at length, in the fourth and fifth centuries, we see the futile attempts of the Roman authorities to curb and crush Christianity, only to lead to the spread of it far and wide.

Dr. Jowett, speaking of the century in which Christianity arose, says, "Could we have seen depicted the inner life of that brilliant period, we should have turned from it with loathing and disgust." And Renan, in words often quoted, said, "Jesus Christ created a paradise out of the hell of Rome." [See also Glover. The Conflict of Religions in the Early Roman Empire, chapters iv and v.] As Christianity commenced, so it continued through the centuries, influencing men and States in proportion as it was allowed to be propagated in its purity and fullness.

On the evidence of some of the greatest opponents of Christianity, it has surpassed all other religions in its remarkable power over human life. It has kept up with human growth and evolution through the ages, and it has shown itself to possess a capacity for cultivating holiness and developing character which has no equal in philosophy or religion in any part of the world. Mr. Lecky's words are well worth repeating - The Platonist exhorted men to imitate God; the Stoic, to follow reason; the Christian, to the love of Christ.

The later Stoics had often united their notions of excellence in an ideal sage, and Epictetus had even urged his disciples to set before them some man of surpassing excellence, and to imagine him continually near them; but the utmost the Stoic ideal could become was a model for imitation, and the admiration it inspired could never deepen into affection. It was reserved for Christianity to present to the world an ideal character, which through all the changes of eighteen centuries has inspired the hearts of men with an impassioned love; has shown itself capable of acting on all ages, nations, temperaments, and conditions; has been not only the highest pattern of virtue, but the strongest incentive to its practice; and has exercised so deep an influence that it may be truly said that the simple record of three short years of active life has done more to regenerate and soften mankind than all the disquisitions of philosophers and all the exhortations of moralists.

This has indeed been the wellspring of whatever is best and purest in the Christian life. Amid all the sins and failings, amid all the priestcraft and persecution and fanaticism that have defaced the Church, it has preserved in the character and example of its Founder, an enduring principle of regeneration. [Lecky. History of European Morals. vol. ii. p. 8.] The testimony to the present work of Jesus Christ is not less real than it has been in the past. In the case of all the other great names of the world's history, the inevitable invariable experience has been that the particular man is first a power, then only a name, and last of all a mere memory.

Of Jesus Christ the exact opposite is true. He died on a cross of shame, His name gradually became more and more powerful, and He is the greatest influence in the world today. There is as it has been well said, a fifth Gospel being written - the work of Jesus Christ in the hearts and lives of men and nations. The present social status of men, women, and children is so familiar to us that we sometimes fail to realize what it was before Christ came. In the Roman world the father had absolute right over his children, to sell, enslave, to kill them.

It is Christianity that has made these atrocities impossible. Woman was the living chattel of her husband, as she is still in India and Africa. It is through Christianity that she has obtained a new status, and now in Christian countries "Home" receives its true and full meaning. The slavery of the Roman Empire was one of its most deep-seated features, and the power of master over slave was as absolute as it was often exercised with cruelty and ferocity. But Christianity proclaimed the universality and brotherhood of all men in Christ, and thereby struck at the root of slavery, and wherever the Gospel of Christ has had its way, slavery has been compelled to disappear.

Then, too, the reality and purity of marriage are what they are today because of Christianity, while the blessings of humanitarianism, with the absence of cruelty, torture, and callousness, and the presence of hospitals, refugees, care for prisoners, kindness to animals, are all largely, and indeed mainly, attributable to the influence of Christ and His Gospel. The teaching of Christ about God, sin, redemption, holiness, love, has impressed, influenced, and inspired human life as nothing else has done and as, apparently, nothing else can do. [See Brace, Gesta Christi, chapters ii to vii.]

Then, too, we are compelled to face the fact, the truly wonderful fact, of missionary enterprise. There are many things in which Christianity is like other religions, but the one element of unlikeness and uniqueness is its worldwide missions. Other religions may have their missions, but they lack the note of universality which is the most remarkable feature of Christian missions. Christianity, rising out of the narrowest of religions, is becoming the universal religion. Prompted by universal loyalty to Christ and universal love to man, missionaries have gone forth far and wide, backed by no earthly power, influenced by no earthly

incentive, proclaiming the simple message of a personal Saviour, and wherever they have gone the results have been nothing short of stupendous.

The general influence alone has been great in its formation of new literatures, new ideals, new philanthropies, while the transformations of men and races in Fiji, Uganda, New Zealand, Tierra del Fuego, are among the most noteworthy features of modern history. And when we study the lives of the missionaries who have gone forth on this errand of universal evangelization we find among them the finest types of manhood. As we recall such names as Carey, Martyn, Livingstone, Patteson, Paton, Chalmers, Hudson Taylor, Hannington, Mackay, Pilkington, we realize that we are face to face with some of the most splendid and noble of characters.

There is, in a word, no part of the modern outlook in which the power of Christianity is more evident than in the mission fields. A competent witness who has recently visited most of the great missionary centers of the world has given his testimony to the power of missionary effort. I do not recall visiting a single country where I formed the impression that Christ and His cause are meeting with defeat. I do not remember having heard the voice of despair and pessimism from the leaders of the Christian hosts on any of these continents.

True it is that I have visited fields where the forces of our Lord seem to be hard pressed; but taking the world as a whole, I may say that victory is being achieved. [Address, July, 1908, by Mr. J. R. Mott. Cf. his *Modern World Movements*, p. 17. See also a fine statement by Dr. J. R. Moulton, *Hibbert Journal*, vol. vii, p. 665 (July 1909).] When, therefore, we think of the moral and social achievements of Christianity in the past, especially in regard to women, children, and slaves; when we think of its influence today both at home and in other lands; when we recall its power compared with that of other religions in regard to deliverance from sin, power for holy living, and incentives to individual and collective progress, we fearlessly challenge all attempts to find anything like it, or to account for this influence apart from a belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and God.

All the great modern nations of the world date their history from the birth of Christ, and even the sceptic testifies to Christ by the date of his letters. It is Christianity alone which gives to the Western world its vast superiority over the Eastern, and its irresistible impulse to progress. Japan in particular bears its indirect but very real testimony to the power of Christianity, for the main secret of Japan's metamorphosis and marvelous development is the adoption of Western ideals which have largely sprung from Christianity.

East and West unite in their testimony to the influence of Jesus Christ. I shall take, first, the well-known saying Keshub Chunder Sen, one of the most remarkable and representative figures of modern times. "If you wish to secure that allegiance and attachment of India, it must be through spiritual influence and moral suasion." And such indeed has been the case in India. You cannot deny that your hearts have been touched, conquered, and subjugated by a superior power. That power, need I tell you, is Christ.

It is Christ who rules British India, and not the British Government. England sent out a tremendous moral power in the life and character of the mighty prophet, to conquer and to hold this vast Empire. ... Take now what Max Gohre in his remarkable volume, *Drei Monate Fabrik-Arbeiter*, tells us of the inner thought of that formidable new democracy that is growing up in modern Germany, alienated not only from the present social order, but from all conventional religious belief and communion.

After drawing the darkest picture of the lapse from all definite Christian belief of the workmen in the Chemnitz factory in which he laboured, he says, "One thing only has remained in all of them - esteem and

reverence for Jesus Christ." [Cairns, Christianity in the Modern World, p. 16.] Nor can we overlook the evidence of Christ's influence, as men are brought face to face with the deepest problems of life. What are we to say of the problem of human sin? Call it what we like, the fact by any other name would be as bad.

Where can we find the power to deliver man from evil, to overcome the evil principle within, and to give the conscience rest and peace amidst the burdens of life? Cotter Morison in his *Service of Man*, which on its publication twenty-two years ago was spoken of as the most powerful attack on Christianity during that generation, [Athenaeum, Jan. 29, 1887.] frankly admits that there is no remedy for a bad heart, that society has a right to extirpate the hardened criminal, and to prevent him from leaving a progeny as bad as himself. [J.

C. Morison, *Service of Man*, pp. 293-295.] There is no good news in this for the outcast, the depraved, the abandoned, the hopeless. To tell such people that they are to be extirpated is to confess the ghastly failure to deal with sin. Nor can education, or philosophy, or even social reform cope with this gigantic power of evil. Yet thousands and millions today, as in all ages, are testifying to the power and glory of Christianity in dealing with their sin and wickedness. These are facts which stand the test of examination and carry their own conclusion to all who are willing to learn.

What, too, shall we say about human weakness, the inability to live righteous lives, the constant struggle and defeat in the face of what seem to be omnipotent foes? Science, with all its discoveries and glories during the past century, has no word of hope for the individual. It may be true, as Darwin says, that all organized beings are slowly advancing towards perfection, but meanwhile what joy or comfort is this to the individual who longs to live a holy life, and who finds himself powerless to resist the forces within him and around him?

The old question still awaits an answer - "Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased, Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow?" And there is no answer apart from Jesus Christ. What, too, are we to say about the unrest of soul as we attempt to peer into the future? Here again science has nothing to say. Science has inspired us with wonderful hope during the last fifty years, until there seems scarcely any limit to human discoveries and inventions, and yet in the midst of all this hopefulness there never has been a time when men have been more hopeless or uncertain about the future.

The testimony of Tyndall to the futility of materialism, [Belfast Address, Preface, p. 36.] the tacit admission of Huxley in his invention of the word "agnostic," and the pessimism of Thomas Hardy are illustrations of the utter powerlessness of philosophy, science, education, culture, progress to deal with the deepest problems of human life. And yet all the while many and many a simple-hearted life is finding in Jesus Christ the secret of deliverance from sin, the guarantee against moral weakness, and the inspiration of an immortal hope.

It is, of course, true that Mohammed, Buddha and Confucius have founded religions that now possess millions of followers, but the patent fact is that these religions are not making progress among the most enlightened and civilized races, while Christianity is gradually extending its boundaries and compelling the attention of the best thought of the world. How is it that the other religions are either stationary or else retreating before the advance of knowledge, while Christianity is ever pushing forward into fresh enterprises of thought and action all over the world?

What was it in the personality of Jesus Christ that accounts for His influence on mankind in the past, and what is it that accounts for His growing influence on the most civilized nations today? How is it that during

the nineteen centuries of Christianity in the world, with all the progress of human thought and life, not a single new ethical idea has been discovered outside the teaching of Jesus Christ? How is it that a religion emanating almost entirely from a narrow and obscure people like the Jews should possess the completest ethical ideal that the world knows, and one capable of ever-extending application to all circumstances and conditions of human life?

When Jesus Christ left this earth He told His disciples that after His departure they should do greater works than He had done, and the centuries of Christianity have borne out the truth of this statement. Works greater in kind have been done - are being done. Jesus Christ is doing more wonderful things today than ever He did when on earth, redeeming souls, changing lives, transforming characters, exalting ideals, inspiring philanthropies, and making for the best, truest, and highest in human life and progress.

We are therefore justified in calling attention to the influence of Christ through the ages as one of the greatest, most direct, and most self-evident proofs that Christianity is Christ, and that Christ has to be accounted for. It is impossible to consider this question solely as one of history; it touches life at every point today. We have not solved, we have not even stated and defined, the problem as to the Person of Christ when we have written the life of Jesus, for that problem is raised even less by the Gospels than by Christ's place and function in the collective history of man. ...

The very essence of the matter is that the Gospels do not stand alone, but live, as it were, embosomed in universal history. And in that history Christ plays a part much more remarkable and much less compatible with common manhood than the part Jesus plays in the history of His own age and people. And we have not solved, or even apprehended, any one of the problems connected with His person until we have resolved the mystery of the place He has filled and the things He has achieved in the collective life of man. [Fairbairn, *The Philosophy of the Christian Religion*, p. 13.]

Who and what must Jesus Christ be to have effected all this? Surely we are compelled to admit at least His uniqueness. And when we have done this we are bound to go further and inquire as to the secret and explanation of this uniqueness. Why should Jesus, the Jewish peasant of Nazareth, have become the Founder of a religion which has shown and is showing its power to become a universal religion? The only adequate explanation of His work is the Christian explanation of His Person - He was God manifest in the flesh.

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