

HOW TO READ THE GOSPEL AND WHAT IS ITS ESSENCE?

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In what is taught as Christ's teaching there are so many strange, improbable, incomprehensible, and even contradictory things, that one does not know how to comprehend it.

Besides, this teaching is not understood alike: some say that the whole matter is in the redemption ; others, that the whole matter is in grace which is received through the sacraments ; others again, that the whole matter is in the obedience to the church. But the different churches understand the teaching differently : the Catholic Church recognizes the origin of the Holy Ghost from the Son and the Father and the infallibility of the Pope, and regards salvation as possible, especially through works ; the Lutheran does not recognize this, and regards salvation as possible, especially through faith ; the Greek Orthodox recognizes the origin of the Holy Ghost from the Father, and for salvation considers both works and faith to be necessary.

The Anglican, Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Methodist churches, to say nothing of a hundred other churches, all understand the Christian teaching, each in its own way.

I am frequently approached by young men and by people from the masses, who have lost their faith in the truth of the church teaching, in which they were educated, asking me what my teaching consists in, how I understand the Christian teaching. Such questions always pain and even offend me.

Christ – God, according to the teaching of the church – came down upon earth, in order to reveal divine truth to men for their guidance in life. A man, – a simple, foolish man, – who wants to convey to people an injunction which is of importance to them, always knows how to convey it in such a way that the people can understand it. Suddenly God came down upon earth only in order to save men, and this God did not know how to say what he had to say, so as to keep people from interpreting it in such a way as to diverge in the comprehension of it.

This is impossible, if Christ was God.

This cannot be, even if Christ was not God, but only a great teacher. A great teacher is great for the very reason that he knows

how to tell a truth, that is as clear as daylight, so that it is impossible to conceal or shroud it.

And so, in either case, there must be the truth in the gospels which give us Christ's teaching. Indeed, the truth is in the gospels to be found by all those who will read them with a sincere desire to know the truth and without any preconceived notion and, above all else, without any idea that in them is to be found some special wisdom, which is not accessible to the human mind.

I read the gospels in this manner, and found in them an absolutely comprehensible truth, which, as it says in the gospels, can be understood by babes. And so, when I am asked wherein my teaching consists, and how I understand the Christian teaching, I answer, " I have no teaching, and I understand the Christian teaching as it is expounded in the gospels. If I have written books on the Christian teaching, I did so only to prove the incorrectness of those explanations which are made by the commentators of gospels.

In order to understand the Christian teaching as it is in reality, it is necessary, first of all, not to interpret the gospels, but to understand them just as they are written. And so, in reply to the question as to how we are to understand Christ's teaching, I say, " If you wish to understand Christ's teaching, read the gospels, – read them after having renounced every preconceived comprehension, with the one desire to understand what is said in the gospels. But for the very reason that the Gospel is a sacred book, it ought to be read with understanding and analysis, and not at haphazard, in succession, ascribing the same meaning to every word found in it.

To understand any book, it is necessary to set aside everything comprehensible from everything incomprehensible and complicated in it, and from this sifted comprehensible material to form an idea of the meaning and the spirit of the whole book, and then on the basis of what is fully comprehensible to explain the passages that are incomprehensible or complicated. Thus we read every kind of a book. So much the more must we thus read the Gospel, a book which has passed through complicated harmonizations, translations, and transcriptions, composed eighteen centuries ago by uneducated and superstitious people.¹

¹ As is well known to all who study the origin of these books, the Gospel is by no means the infallible expression of divine truth, but the product of numerous human hands and minds, full of errors, and so it can in no way be taken as the production of the Holy Ghost, as the churchmen say it is. If this were so, God Himself would have revealed it, just as it says that He revealed the commandments on Mount Sinai or by some miracle transmitted to men a complete book, as the Mormons maintain about their sacred writings. We now know how these books were written down, collected, corrected, translated, and so we not only cannot accept them as an infallible revelation, but are obliged, if we value truth, to correct the errors which we find in them.– Author's Note.

Thus, in order to understand the Gospel, it is necessary first of all to sift in it what is fully comprehensible and simple from what is incomprehensible and complicated, and having done so, to read what is clear and comprehensible several times in succession, trying to become familiar with the meaning of this simple, clear teaching, and then only, on the basis of the meaning of the whole teaching, to make out the meaning of those passages which seemed complicated and obscure. Thus I did with the reading of the gospels, and the meaning of Christ's teaching was revealed to me with such clearness that no doubt could be left. And so I advise every man who wishes to understand the true meaning of Christ's teaching to do likewise.

Let him who reads the Gospel underline everything which to him appears quite simple, clear, and comprehensible with a blue pencil, marking, besides, with a red pencil, these passages in Christ's own words as distinct from the words of the evangelists, and let him read these passages, which are underlined red, several times. Only after he understands these passages well, let him again read all the other, incomprehensible, and so previously not underlined passages from Christ's discourses, and let him underline in red those that have become comprehensible to him. But the passages which contain such of Christ's words as remain entirely incomprehensible should remain unmarked. The passages which are thus marked in red will give the reader the essence of Christ's teaching, what all men need, and what, therefore, Christ said in such a way that all might understand it. The passages underlined with blue only will give what the writers of the gospels said in their own name and what is comprehensible.

It is very likely that in marking what is completely comprehensible, and what not, different people will mark different passages, so that what is comprehensible to one will appear obscure to another; but on the main things all men will be sure to agree, and one and the same thing will appear completely comprehensible to all. It is this which is absolutely comprehensible to all that forms the essence of Christ's teaching.

In my Gospel my marks are made in correspondence with my comprehension.

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