

## TO THE DEAR YOUTH

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Your letter is, not in spite, but in consequence, of your youth so heartfelt and so serious that, no matter how difficult and how inconvenient it is for me to answer it in a short letter, I shall none the less try to do so.

You write that you do not need any defence of the necessity of faith, that you recognize this necessity. That is nice ! Thank God for this. You have that which no one can give. As Christ has said : " No man can come to me except the Father draws him."

But you say: "What shall I believe in?" You say: " Christianity, but which ? "

There may be two conceptions : Christ God, the son of God, who came down from heaven, in order to save and enlighten men, and Christ the man, one of those in whom there is the highest divine wisdom, who lived eighteen hundred years ago, and who founded a teaching which has taken possession of humanity, and has transformed it.

Let us at first admit the second supposition, which I have never fully admitted, and which, I assume, is also unpleasant for you to admit. Let us admit it. Christ is a great sage and teacher, not only in words, but also in his life and death. Is there any possibility of perverting the teaching of such a man ? How, for example, can we pervert Socrates' teaching ? Let them pervert and distort

him as much as they please. He who understands the spirit of Socrates' teaching will without any effort and without any labour reject the perversions, and leave what forms the essence of the teaching.

A great teacher is great for this very reason, that he is clear, unambiguous, and unsubjected to perversions, just as a diamond cannot be ground by anything weaker than it itself is.

For the same reason there can be no different interpretations of the great teacher. He is great for the very reason that he has unified everything which was scattered and dispersed. How can his teaching break up into different sects ? If the great teaching breaks up into different sects, this means that something false is falling to pieces, something which is called by the name of a great teaching, but not the teaching itself.

If the great teaching (the one which I recognize as great) should

present itself to me as corrupted or breaking up into a multitude of sects, what else could I do but take the teaching itself, the one which is nearest to the teacher, in which there are most of his utterances, and begin to read it, trying to penetrate its meaning. If the teaching is distorted and has broken up into a multitude of sects, one of two things is true : either the teaching itself is insignificant, or I do not know the great teaching.

And so, in the case of the second assumption, that Christ is a wise man, it is necessary quite freely to read the gospels of the four evangelists, and without self-satisfaction and without false joy to read this book, as we read the books of the sages. Then there will at once appear the greatness of the teaching, the distortions will fall off at once, and it will become clear that the breaking up into sects does not take place in the teaching itself, but in the artificial sphere which is outside of it.

The necessity of simply and naively reading the four evangelists, excerpting from them the utterances of Christ Himself, becomes even more obvious in the case of the first assumption. Christ God once during the whole existence of the world descended upon earth in order to reveal to men their salvation. He came down out of love for men. He lived, and taught, and died, loving men. You and I are men. We suffer and are agonized in our search for salvation, and we do not find it. Why, then, did Christ come down into the world ? There is something wrong here.

Could God, upon coming down to the world, have forgotten you and me ? Or was He unable to speak in such a way that we might understand ? But He did speak, and we have His words before us. They are before us in precisely the same form in which they were before those who heard His sermon on the mount. Why did all those understand ? Why did they not say that it was obscure, and why did they not ask Him for explanations ? No, they understood Him, and said that they had never heard anything like it, that He was teaching them as ἐξουσίαν ἔχων, as one having power. Why is it incomprehensible to us, and why are we afraid that we shall break up into sects ? Evidently because we do not hear Him, but those who stood in His place.

Thus, as in the first assumption, there is one thing left to do, and that is, to listen to His words with childish simplicity, as a child listens to his mother, with the full assurance that his mother, loving him, will be able to tell him everything clearly and simply, and that only his mother will tell him the real truth and everything necessary for his good. We need only read in this manner, rejecting, at least for a time, all considerations about what by others is considered divine, just, lawful, in order that it may become absolutely clear that God has not deceived us, that He has, indeed, given us salvation, and has revealed to us the truth, as indubitably and as comprehensibly as the mathematical truths are revealed to us, when we learn them.

With such a reading the spirit of Christ's teaching is revealed to

us, that is, that universal principle which permeates everything, and which will guide us in the comprehension or non-comprehension of obscure passages. I say " non-comprehension," because the non-comprehension of obscure passages for a man who is permeated with the spirit of the teaching does not interfere with the clear, full comprehension of clear passages. To a man who is permeated with the spirit of the teaching an obscure passage means only this, that the writing on paper is the work of human hands and is subject to errors, but in no way can lead him into error as to the meaning of the clear passages.

Only he who seeks the letter, and not the spirit, can ascribe an arbitrary meaning, which is frequently contrary to the spirit of the teaching, to the obscure passages. The obscure passages cannot interfere with the understanding of the teaching. There are too many passages which are clear, divine, subject to no varying interpretations, all of them united among themselves by one principle and by the immediate and ecstatic consciousness of the truth, passages which echo in the hearts of all men, in order that the obscure passages should interfere with the comprehension. What interferes with the comprehension is something else, that of which the gospel says : " They did not walk toward the light, for their works were evil."

What interferes with the comprehension of Christ's teaching is this, that the works of the world amidst which we have grown up and live, of the world which has the impudence to call itself Christian, are evil, and we do not want to see what arraigns us, that what is demanded of us is a renunciation of what we have become fond of, and the cross, which Christ recognizes as a necessary condition of the life of His disciple.

Christ's teaching is as simple, clear, and indubitable as the fact that all right angles are equal, but' I have seen a man build a crooked house, and so deny this truth. In order that I may understand Christ's teaching, I must first of all say to myself that what I am studying is the highest law, the law of God, and that, therefore, I with this law measure all the other laws which I know, and not vice versa, look in God's law for what confirms the human laws, but in advance recognize it as holy. Only he will understand Christ's teaching who, before studying it, will clearly establish in his soul the meaning of what he is seeking, – he who recognizes as holy nothing but his soul, as a human soul, and its relation to God.

We have been taught that we can be Christians, without effort, ever since our baptism, that is, almost since our birth, without any labour, without any self-renunciation.

Christ has said (Luke xiv. 33) : " Who forsaketh not all that he hath cannot be my disciple." But there have been no such Christians, and there can be none. The kingdom of God is always taken by force, and it cannot be otherwise. It is impossible to serve God and mammon, – it is impossible to be a little bit a Christian, to hold on to Christianity for the sake of pleasure, of decency, of

consolation in the heavy moments of life. Christianity is the teaching of the true life.

Christ says : " He that believeth on me hath life, and he that believeth not hath not life." And so the faith in Christ changes a man's whole life and imposes on him what he calls the cross.

I do not know whether I have said anything of importance to you. I am afraid not, though I should like to very much, for I have come to love you from your letter. I think that you will get some of my writings on religious questions, and then you will probably see clearly what now is not comprehensible to you. Seek and you will find. That is so simple. All the needs which are

stored in man receive their satisfaction ; how, then, is it possible that the highest need of faith should not have it? All that is necessary is to reject the false conceptions.

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