

The Seditious Sermon



E. Stanley Jones

Men need nothing in these modern days so much as they need a working philosophy of life—an adequate way to live. Loosed from the moorings that have held life, many are now adrift. They claim to be free. They have thrown overboard the chart, the compass, the steering wheel, and the consciousness of destination. They are free from everything—everything except the rocks, and the storms, and the insufferable absurdity of being tossed from wave to wave of mere meaningless emotion.

“I have no solution to the problem of life and of suffering, and I seem to be predestined to have no solution,” said an earnest Hindu to me. Said another, a Hindu professor, “I began to give up one thing after another and then I found that everything was gone, even my universe. I was also ready to give up myself and commit suicide. My life is getting duller and duller every day. It has no meaning. But maybe there will something work out of it. So far it has brought me nothing.” A chairman of a meeting in which I had spoken on a working philosophy of life said, “I have lived a long time, but as yet I have no philosophy of life, let alone a working philosophy of life. I am inwardly a chaos, full of clash and confusion, and I dare say that there are many of you here who are like me.”

There *are* many who are like him—increasingly so. Nor are they all outside of the Christian Church. The Christian is asking with increasing anxiety, and I believe with increasing sincerity, “What is the Christian’s working way to live?”

A brilliant lady in high society in the West, who had stumbled on the treasure hid in the field of human life, and had gone off and for joy thereof had sold all that she had to buy that field, said to the writer, “Now that I am a Christian, what are you going to do with me? How does one act as a Christian? What is the technique of being a Christian?”

I did not answer this penetrating question at once, because—well, I wasn’t sure, and the sincerity of the question demanded that I be sure.

Now, after months and years of brooding amid the storm and clash of things, I have come to the conclusion that what we call the Sermon on the Mount is the way a Christian will act, that it constitutes the technique of being a Christian—it is his working philosophy of life.

Among the many things which India has taught me are two outstanding: First, she compelled me to disentangle

Christ from the accumulations which the centuries had gathered around Him. It was a liberating experience to find one’s faith becoming simplified and centered in a Person.

For years I have walked in that liberty; but for several years there has been an undertone of questioning, and rather troubled questioning. The question was this: Yes, Christ is the center, and to be a Christian is to catch His mind and His spirit, but what main content should be in those words “Christ” and “Christian”? It is not enough to have the words. The deeper question is, what do we mean by “being centered in the person of Christ?” Because the answer varies, and varies vitally.

So India has taught me the second thing: the main moral content in the word “Christian” must be the Sermon on the Mount. India is forcing us to face anew the Sermon on the Mount. She insists that this is Christianity. No matter how much we may point to our creeds, she insists on pointing us to the pattern shown her in the Mount. The fact is that the Sermon on the Mount is not in our creeds. As the Apostles’ Creed now stands, you can accept every word of it and leave the essential self untouched.

Suppose we had written it in our creeds and had repeated each time with conviction: “I believe in the Sermon on the Mount and in its way of life, and I intend, God helping me, to embody it!” What would have happened? I feel sure that if this had been our main emphasis, the history of

Christendom would have been different. With emphasis on doctrines which left unaffected our way of life, the Christian Church could accept Constantine as its prize convert. And yet Constantine, after his alleged conversion, murdered his conquered colleague and brother-in-law Licinius; sentenced to death his eleven-year-old nephew, killed his eldest son, Crispus; brought about the death of his second wife; took the nails that were supposed to come from the cross of Christ and used one in his war helmet and another on the bridle of his war horse.

Yet he was canonized by the Greek Church and his memory celebrated “as equal to the apostles.” He talked and presided at the opening of the Council of Nicaea, which was called to frame a creed, and he was hailed as “a bishop of bishops.” Could this have happened if the men who had gathered there had made the Sermon on the Mount an essential part of the Creed? It had no place in it, so Constantine could be at home. What had happened was that the Chris-

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tian Church had been conquered by a pagan warrior. And the church allowed itself to be thus conquered, for this ideal of Christ did not have possession of its soul. For the same reason, a bishop could kick another to death in the cathedral of Constantinople to prove his orthodoxy, and the Monophysites of Alexander could cry, "As thou hast divided, so shalt thou be divided," and then proceed to butcher those who believed in the dual nature of Christ in order to prove that the nature of Christ was one and indivisible.

These things sound strange to our ears, but it is only because the ideas of the Sermon on the Mount are reasserting their ascendancy over our spirit and are beginning to come back as central in the thinking of the Christian. Even now it is far from being an essential part of our Christian thinking. Even now, in many quarters, the orthodoxy of the creed is looked on as more essential than the orthopraxy [correct practice] of the deed. We have saluted this ideal, but have not taken it seriously. We have used it for polemic, but not for practice. We have done as the British officers did in one of the battles of the Sikh war: they shut up the commanding general in a high tower, locked the door, and then went out and fought the battle on their own principles. We have locked this ideal of Christ in high towers of reverence and respect and have then gone off to fight the battle of life in our own way, on our own principles—or lack of them—to our disaster.

The greatest need of modern Christianity is the rediscovery of the Sermon on the Mount as the only practical way to live. However, we have an undertone of doubt and fear that it is not workable. We feel that it is trying to give human nature a bent that it will not take; it is trying to force something on us for which human nature is not made.

Chesterton says that on the first reading you feel that the Sermon on the Mount turns everything upside down, but the second time you read it you discover that it turns everything right side up. The first time you read it, you feel that it is impossible; the second time, you feel that nothing else is possible. The more I have pondered on this way of life, the more I am persuaded that instead of all the moral impossibilities lying in the Sermon on the Mount, as we often think, the fact is that all the moral possibilities lie here, and all the impossibilities lie outside. We have become so used to other ways of living that this way seems out of place. It is like when I sat for a long time with my legs twisted under me, and when I got up to walk it was exceedingly painful to straighten them out and difficult to move along. I had sat in an unnatural position so long that the natural functioning of the legs seemed unnatural.

A wolf-child, captured near where I live in India, had lived with wolves from the age of two to the age of eleven. It ran on all fours. Its knee joints were stiff and enlarged from running in this fashion. It would eat only raw meat, and when it was put on a more civilized diet, it took dysentery and died. A human being had lived in a wolf environment on wolf principles, on a wolf diet for nine years. Human nature had so accommodated itself to it that it seemed the natural way to live, and our more human ways seemed unnatural. We have lived so long on the wolf-principles of selfishness and competition and strife that the Christian way of unselfishness, cooperation, and love seems to us a foreign way.

But nowhere has the gospel been more weakened and explained away than here. One commentator of modern days says that "we must not degrade the Sermon on the Mount by a grotesque literalism." No, nor must we denature them by an absurd spiritualizing.

Years ago when I asked Mahatma Gandhi what we could do to naturalize Christianity in India so that it would cease to be a foreign thing, among other things he replied: "Practice your religion without adulterating it or toning it down;" and he had in mind the Sermon on the Mount. It is Mahatma Gandhi's literal insistence upon this way of acting in gaining political freedom that has startled and challenged the whole Western world. He has proved that it is possible, and that is power. This fresh discovery, by a Hindu, of a truth long buried beneath the armaments of the fighting West has been one of the most important spiritual discoveries of modern times. We have now no alternative but to be Christian according to this pattern, or cease to be Christians in any effective sense at all.

A Moslem college professor arose at the close of one of my meetings and thanked me for saying what I had been saying, but urged me that I go to the West and preach this Sermon on the Mount to *them*, that *they* needed it. The applause that greeted his statement showed that the audience agreed. I replied that I would, but that human need and human sin were not geographical, that in a round world it is difficult to tell where East begins and West ends, that we are all in the same deep need.

While I believed my answer was true, nevertheless concerning the Sermon on the Mount there are just two great questions, one from the East and one from the West. The East asks, "Will you practice it?" And the West, "Can we practice it?"

Is it workable? The core of the religious problem of the world is just here. Dean Inge rightly says that if Christianity

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cannot hold us at the place of ethical conduct—if it loses the battle at that place—then what is left is not worth fighting over. For, mind you, if the ethical side of our gospel is unworkable, then by that very fact the redemptive side is rendered worthless. The center and substance of the Christian's ethical conduct is in the Sermon on the Mount.

If this is unworkable, then there is not much left. We must turn our conduct over to other ways of living and stand beside dead altars, repeating dead creeds. We have insisted that what we call Christian experience is an absolute necessity and that without that which Pentecost provides, we cannot be Christian in any vital sense. This is true. But it must be remembered that behind Pentecost lay the Sermon on the Mount.

Pentecost had the content of the Sermon on the Mount in it and therefore the power manifested was Christian. Pentecost divorced from the Sermon on the Mount is spiritual powwow instead of spiritual power. But this way of life has been toned down and made "safe." The Marquis of Wellesley, a hundred years ago, said that it was "dangerous to send the Bible to India with its ideas of human equality, without the safeguard of a commentary." The Marquis was right. The Bible, with its ideas of human equality, was dangerous to the kind of society that existed in India, organized as it was on caste. It was dangerous also to the kind of an empire that existed in Britain, organized as it was on the "right" of the white to rule.

The Sermon on the Mount seems dangerous. It challenges the whole underlying conception on which modern society is built. It would replace it by a new conception, animate it with a new motive, and turn it toward a new goal.

One day I was addressing an audience of Hindus and Moslems and was interpreting the Sermon on the Mount. Before me sat two Criminal Investigation Department men, secret service police taking down shorthand notes of what I was saying, to be sent to the government to see if anything seditious could be found in it. A Christian government sends Hindu and Moslem agents to find out if the Sermon on the Mount is seditious! It is! The ideas underlying the Sermon on the Mount are the charter of freedom to all men, of all races, of all climes, of all classes.

The secret police of the Modern Economic Order might have sent their agents to see if there is anything seditious against their Order in this Sermon. There is! This Sermon strikes at the whole selfish competitive idea underlying modern economic life, and demands that men cooperate in love or perish in strife. The Military might have sent their secret police to see if there was anything seditious against their methods in the Sermon. There is! The Sermon challenges

the whole conception of force which militarism holds, and would substitute the method of love. The churches might have sent representatives to see if there is anything seditious against them. There is! Denominationalism often expresses itself in ways that are not much more than a church race in competitive armaments. It would find the Sermon on the Mount seditious, for it demands that individuals and groups and nations lose themselves in cooperation that they may find themselves in a higher brotherhood.

The Sermon on the Mount was and is seditious. It finally put Jesus on the cross, and it will do the same for his followers who follow it in modern life. But it would not end there.

There would be a resurrection so great, so transforming in human living, that we would know by actual experimentation that it is the only way for us to live.

"We love the Christ of the Sermon on the Mount and the Christ of the Seamless Robe at

Calvary, but the Christ of dogmatism—No!" said a thoughtful Hindu to me one day. Are they different? Have the Christ of the Sermon on the Mount and the Christ of the creeds become different? If so, then the greatest task before Christendom is to bring them together. For no other kind of Christianity can lead this turbulent age.

A little man in a loin cloth in India [Ghandi] picks out from the Sermon on the Mount one of its central principles, applies it as a method of human freedom; and the world, challenged and charmed, bends over to catch the significance of the great sight. It is a portent of what would happen if we would take the *whole* of the Sermon on the Mount and apply it to the whole of life. It would renew our Christianity—it would renew the world. Our present-day Christianity, anaemic and weak from the parasites that have fastened themselves on its life through the centuries, needs a blood transfusion from the Sermon on the Mount in order to renew radiant health within it, so that it may throw off these parasites and arise to serve and save the world.

But will this ideal work? Is it practicable? Just here is the central area of our skepticism. We are not quite sure that the Sermon on the Mount is the sermon for the market. We are not sure, and an unsure place is an unsafe place.

We must go on or go back. We must be more Christian or less! ~

This article is a condensed version of the "Introduction" to the book *The Christ of the Mount—A Working Philosophy of Life* by E. Stanley Jones (1884-1973), a missionary to India. Some wording was rephrased to aid in readability. The use of this "Introduction" is not an endorsement by *The Heartbeat of the Remnant* of everything the book may teach.