

THE EPISTLE TO  
**THE HEBREWS**

OR  
**CHRISTIANITY**

*versus*

**RITUALISM**

By C.E.S.



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(THE BEARING OF ITS TEACHING UPON RITUALISM AND  
MODERN THOUGHT.)

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GOD can bring order out of that where chaos has reigned. Scripture opens with the announcement of this, when the earth was being prepared for man's use (Gen. i.). And Scripture closes with a fresh and final proof of it, after the heavens shall have passed away with a great noise, and the elements shall be dissolved with fervent heat, the earth also and the works therein be burnt up, God will make a new heaven and a new earth wherein will dwell righteousness (2 Pet. iii.; Rev. xxi.). Similarly can He work in the midst of the confusion wrought by men upon earth. In the early days of Christianity this was manifested, as the mistakes and shortcomings of His people became occasions for a ministry of truth suited for the time in which it was vouchsafed, and suited for our day also. He who brought order out of chaos brings blessing out of the disorders and failures of His saints.

The mistakes of the Galatians in thinking to be circumcised and to put themselves under law for justification called forth that letter written by the Apostle Paul, so fruitful in instruction then, and now. The disorders at Corinth, the sectarianism rife amongst the Christians in that city, as well as the denial of the Resurrection, furnished the Apostle, led of the Spirit, with the opportunity to correct these evils, and to place the doctrine of the Resurrection on a plain and unassailable basis. "If there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen." "And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins" (1 Cor. xv. 13-17). To tell people they are wrong is one thing, but that will not always put them right. A mere protest against evil, however powerfully worded, may be barren of results.

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Definite teaching is required, which, while pointing out the evil, will at the same time furnish the reader with instruction to build him up in the truth. This is the way God worked in apostolic times. It is the way He works still. Not that we are to look for fresh revelations. But, accepting the canon of Scripture as complete, we are to learn how teaching drawn forth by the condition of the early Christians can fortify us against snares of our day, and enable any led away to recover themselves through subjection to the written word.

We have spoken of mistakes and of disorders. We must also mention another evil developed in those days, *viz.*, the lack of growth in the truth, springing out, it may have been, from a desire to rest in the acknowledgment of doctrines which could be held without engendering strife or opposition. Such was the condition of the Hebrews years after Christianity had been professed by them. Growth in Christian teaching had not been fostered; nor, it would seem, had it been even desired (Heb. v., 12-13). To meet this state of things, and to establish them in the Christian faith, the Epistle to the Hebrews was written.

Its range of truth and its design are different from that of any other apostolic communication. It ministered Christ to those who had been Jews, with the evident purpose of so settling them in the faith, that no inducements of a peaceful life, no blandishments on the part of their friends, no threats of continued persecution or of martyrdom, should cause any to turn aside, and so land them in apostasy. Then, as we note this in perusing its pages, we may note also features of early Christian worship, which, we must all confess, the Church of God has since those days very much forgotten.

And first we would remark that the Epistle knows *no holy places* on earth for Christians. That upper room, which must ever have been associated in the minds of the Twelve with events of no ordinary interest, is unnoticed; nor is there any indication that the Christians continued to frequent it. One sanctuary there was, to which they all had access, though then only in spirit

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—the heavenly tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, and not man. Of *one sacrifice* for sins, abiding in its efficacy, the Epistle treats, to which nothing could be added, nor could any repetition of it by any on earth be attempted; for the High Priest, who had offered it, offered it once for all, and then sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high, and that for a continuance. It followed, then, that *no altar*, to which the Hebrews were to bring fresh sacrifices, was even thought of. One altar only could they speak of—the cross, on which the Lord has died. A priestly class therefore among them, distinct from all the rest, and appointed to minister at an altar, there was not, there could not be; for each and all had equal access by the blood of Christ into the holiest, and the sacrifices they were permitted to offer as members of the holy priesthood were spiritual sacrifices of praise to God. Then by consequence there was *no part of the sanctuary too holy* for any one of them to tread. The holiest of all they were exhorted to enter in spirit, assured of being there in person by-and-bye; for their Forerunner had already entered in, even Jesus, made a High Priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec (vi. 20). Hence they had a *High Priest*. But they had but one, and could never have another. He had no predecessor. He had no successor, for He ever lives to make intercession for His people (vii. 25). But He was not, and could not have been, High Priest upon earth (viii. 4). A pontiff or high priest, on earth for Christians is foreign to Christianity, and derogatory to Him who is in heaven. Two high priests at once there cannot be. Christians have one in heaven. They cannot have, they do not want, another on earth; for the only sanctuary in which theirs can minister is in the one above. Further, *intercession of saints* with God on their behalf the Hebrews needed not; for every one of them had access to the throne of grace, and could approach it with boldness, to receive what had already been procured for them by the intercession of their great High Priest. So ready was it all that none were told even to ask for what they wanted, but to come and to receive the grace they needed

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(iv. 16). Room then for the intercession of saints, whether that of the Virgin Mary, or of Joseph, or of others, there was not. Such a doctrine not only finds no countenance in this Epistle; the teaching of it negatives the thought of it.

From all this it follows that ritualistic practices, founded on the Jewish form of worship, are foreign to Christianity. A high priest, a sanctuary, a sacrifice, an altar—of these both Jews and Christians could speak. Great however, were the differences, when thy came to dwell on them. A high priest who could not continue by reason of death, a sanctuary on earth, sacrifices which needed repetition, and an altar at which service was daily carried on, on the one hand. On the other, there was a High Priest made such by oath, the sanctuary in heaven which none of them had seen, a sacrifice once offered that cannot be repeated, and an altar that can never be made use of for sacrifice again. These last are features of true Christianity. Of these the Epistle teaches. Ritualistic practices, as commonly understood and pleaded for, are condemned by the apostolic teaching in the Hebrews.

But another line of things there is, somewhat in vogue too in this day. We hear at times about a religion of the future, and that Christianity is played out. Something better then must take its place. This too the Epistle meets, and of it effectually disposes. We confidently ask, What can supersede Christainity? Who will be the apostle of the new faith? Can he surpass in excellency the Apostle of our confession? Moses, the apostle of Judaism, was great. The Son of God is greater. He superseded Moses. Who will surpass Him? There can be no messenger or apostle greater or more august than the Son who has come. Appointed heir of all things, by whom also the worlds were made, He now sits at the right hand of God. A history such as this, reaching into the distant past and continuing to a yet distant future, what can equal?

Then, too, what could any religion in the future offer to outweigh the blessings connected with Christianity? Present and plenary forgiveness of sins; a purged con-

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science, which Judaism in the past could never ensure, and no religion devised by man has proposed to its votaries; a heavenly calling; and entrance into the holiest on high now and for ever—what is there that Christianity does not offer that is of abiding value? What room can there be for a religion of the future to supply, or to perfect, that which can be secured in the present?

Now of all these blessings just enumerated the Epistle to the Hebrews treats, and in a way to set to rest any thought of a new faith of Divine appointment to eclipse that which has been already revealed. There can be none. We claim then for this Epistle an important and unique place in the controversies of the day. It shows up the grievous mistake of ritualistic teaching and practice. It establishes beyond the possibility of doubt that there can be no religion of the future to surpass that of which the Son is the Apostle and High Priest.

But will there be no religion, so called, of the future? There will. And Scripture has characterised it as a "falling away," or apostasy (2 Thess. ii. 3). We read of it in 2 Thessalonians ii. and in Revelations xiii. Its sources and power will be satanic (Rev. xiii. 2). The doom of its two leaders, the political and the ecclesiastical, is to be cast alive into the lake of fire (Rev. xix. 20); whilst its supporters, however numerous and energetic, will ultimately be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb (Rev. xiv. 10).

As to the future, then, Scripture is not reticent; nor is it as to the blessings promised in the Christian faith. Of the one sacrifice which has been once for all offered up it tells us. To the abiding efficacy of the precious blood of Christ it bears testimony, stating in language which a child can understand that where remission of sins is there is no more offering for sin (Heb. x. 18). Rejecting the sacrifice of Christ, there remaineth, it is clearly stated, no more a sacrifice for sins (Heb. x. 26). Accepting His sacrifice, and resting on it, we need no other, and no more.

C. E. S.

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