

THE
OXFORD GROUP
MOVEMENT

Is it Scriptural?

by
H. A. IRONSIDE

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A Sermon Preached in Moody Memorial Church
by Pastor H. A. IRONSIDE



HAVE two texts in mind. The first is in the fifth chapter of Luke's Gospel, verse 39: "No man also having drunk old wine straightway desireth new: for he saith, The old is better." The other is in the twelfth chapter of the book of Revelation, verse 11: "And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death."

Since it came home to me that it might really be a duty to speak on this subject, I have not been unmindful of that passage in Proverbs 18:

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13, "He that answereth a matter before he hear-eth it, it is folly and shame unto him," and I have really taken it up with a great deal of reluctance. I want to frankly acknowledge that I have never attended any of the meetings of the Oxford Group Fellowship, I have never listened to any of their testimonies, I have never heard any of their addresses. A week or so ago I was invited with other ministers of this city to go to the Drake Hotel and attend one of their meetings, but as I had to be away from the city that day, I gave my ticket to one of my associates who attended for me and brought me a report of the meeting. Although I have not participated in any of their services, I have read quite a few of their booklets, pamphlets, and addresses, and I have also had the opportunity of meeting and conversing with a number of earnest Christians who at one time were intimately linked with the movement.

One young minister whom I met on a recent visit to Philadelphia was for three years a very

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active participant in the movement until suddenly awakened to realize how far it was drifting from First Century Christianity. That is one of the names given to the movement. It is frequently known as Buchmanism, because of the fact that Dr. Frank N. D. Buchman, a Lutheran minister, was largely the originator of the movement. It is known also as the Oxford Group Movement. That name, however, would seem to be almost a misnomer, for it had been quite well started before ever the leaders of it went to Oxford. It began here in America on the eastern coast in 1908 and has been carried on chiefly in college circles ever since. It was not until 1920 that Dr. Frank Buchman crossed over to the old country and went to Cambridge and Oxford, and there sought to awaken an interest among the students and some English Church clergymen in his movement. Shortly after that a group of these people left England and went to South Africa to propagate the movement, and it was there that they were first advertised as the Oxford Group Movement.

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There is something, of course, about the name that rather challenges attention. It has been said by some of the members of the inner circle that three of the greatest movements of the last two centuries began at Oxford, and they linked together the Wesleyan movement which, of course, began in the Holy Club at Oxford, the Puseyite, or High Church, movement of a century ago, and now the Buchman movement, or First Century Christianity. I cannot help but feel it is rather a fleshly pride that leads people to link the name of the university city with the movement, when it did not begin there but had gained considerable momentum before its advocates went there at all. Even at the present time, I am told by reliable persons, comparatively few indeed at Oxford have any further interest in this movement.

It is called First Century Christianity. If it is indeed a revival of First Century Christianity, then we who love our Bibles and love the name of our Lord Jesus Christ ought to welcome it

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with open arms, and do everything we can to further its work. The way, of course, to find out whether it is really First Century Christianity revived would be to compare the utterances of its advocates with the utterances of the First Century Christians as recorded in our Bibles. If they are the same, then we need have no fear of the movement; we can thank God for it from the very depths of our souls. But the striking thing is that when we turn to our Bibles and ask, "What was First Century Christianity? What were the great notes dwelt upon by the advocates of it? How do they compare with this present propaganda?" we find indeed a very wide divergence, a great difference. First Century Christianity exalted first of all the Deity of our Lord Jesus Christ, insisted upon the fact that God had made Him who was crucified to be both Lord and Christ, that "there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4: 12). First Century Christianity emphasized with tremendous force the pre-

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precious atoning blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, and as we come to examine the few books that have already been put before the public by the advocates of this latter day movement, we are struck at once by the fact that these great truths are practically absent. I have gone through book after book, supposedly setting forth the teaching of the Oxford Group Movement, and have not found one reference to the precious blood of Christ in any of them, nor any reference to the fact that the worst sin that any one can possibly commit is the sin of rejecting the Lord Jesus Christ.

Some of my friends who have had more intimate connection with it have said that again and again they have put the question to the advocates of the movement, "What place do you give to the atoning blood of Christ?" They have been answered evasively or, if not evasively, sometimes like this, "Oh, we are not a doctrinal movement, we are not advocating any view of the atonement, we are out simply to change the lives

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of people. It does not make any difference to us what they believe theologically as long as their lives are changed. If their lives are not changed, theological differences are of very small moment." And then the question has been put, "But as your converts go on, do they begin to enter into what Scripture has revealed concerning the cleansing blood of the Lord Jesus Christ? You believe they can be converted without knowing anything of this. As they go on, do they get better acquainted with what Scripture teaches concerning the cleansing blood of the Lord Jesus Christ?" And then the answer comes, "They will, if they read the Bible." But the fact remains that these things are practically never taken up by the leaders of the movement. I say "practically" because there are a few exceptions. This movement appeals both to modernists and fundamentalists alike. It appeals to people who reject the inspiration of this Book as well as to those who profess to believe in it; it appeals to people who deny the Deity of Christ as well as to those

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who acknowledge it; to those who deny the eternal punishment of sin as well as to those who believe in it. Here in our city it is openly indorsed by the Swedenborgians and by the leaders of the Unitarians, as well as by a number who belong to the orthodox churches. But it is silent as to the blood of Christ. When some of the orthodox people get into it they naturally carry with them, at least to a certain extent, the teaching that they had before they became associated with the movement. Now any group that soft pedals on the doctrine of the cleansing blood of our Lord Jesus Christ surely should not expect indorsement from those who believe that they owe everything for time and eternity to that precious blood.

This movement makes a great deal of testimony. It is not propagated in the ordinary way by preaching. It seems as though the Word of God, "It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe" (1 Cor. 1: 21), has really failed. Leaders of the movement have said that there has been a great deal

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of preaching but that there must be some other approach to mankind. And although we have no word that our Lord has ever rescinded His instruction, "Go ye into all the world, and *preach* the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16: 15), yet in place of the preaching services Buchman offers us religious house-parties. This is a very remarkable innovation.

A group of them go off by invitation to some country inn, beautiful city hotel, or country home. They boast that they are generally not after the down-and-outers but the up-and-outers, people of wealth, people of fashion and culture, and they gather together to spend several days in fellowship. Their meetings are largely of this character: they come together as groups and devote a great deal of time to testimony. These testimonies are generally in the nature of confessions. They act on the scripture that says, "Confess your faults one to another," and stop there and do not notice the rest of the connection. They take it that the way to get help is to come together

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and confess their faults one to the other. Sometimes as a matter of decency women meet together and confess their sins to each other, and men meet together and confess their sins to each other. When I was in Boston, I found a good deal of scandal had been occasioned by mixed companies holding these parties and confessing their sins, many of which were of such a character that Scripture says, "It is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret" (Eph. 5: 12). Yet they confessed these things openly, men before women and women before men. You can understand that the result was anything but helpful. Where do you find anything in the Word of God that suggests this kind of confession of sin? They say when they come together and honestly face their sins and tell about them, it gives them a certain spiritual strength that enables them to turn from their sins and so enter upon a new and a changed life.

Dr. Buchman has set forth two sets of what he calls, "The Five 'Cs'," which, if acted upon,

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will completely change the life. The first group is in regard to sinners: Conviction, Contrition, Confession, Conversion, Continuance. The other five are in regard to personal workers preparing to deal with others. They are: Confidence, Confession, Conviction, Conversion, Continuance. Now every one of these is all right in its place, but I say to you on the authority of the Word of God that you could participate in all of the five "Cs" in either group and yet never know anything of the saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the first place, the conviction of which they speak is not the conviction on which the New Testament insists. Their conviction is that of wrongfulness indulged in, the wrongfulness of sex sins, sins of pride, sins of jealousy, sins of hypocrisy, and dishonesty. The Word of God, when speaking of the coming of the Holy Spirit, has not a word to say about these sins, bad as they are, but the Lord Jesus says, "When He is come, He shall convict of sin," and of what sin? "Of

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sin, because they believe not on Me." My friend, you might stand up in this audience and confess all the vile, corrupt, filthy, wicked, abominable sins that your memory can bring to mind, and after you had confessed them all, you would not be one inch nearer salvation than before, because all of those sins were dealt with on the cross of Christ, all of those sins were judged when Jesus died upon the tree, and the one great damning sin that will keep you forever out of heaven, if it is not repented of, is the sin of rejecting the Lord Jesus Christ. I have never yet heard of that sin being confessed in a Buchman house-group. It may have been; but over and over again I have asked people who have attended them the question, "Did you ever know of a man standing to his feet in one of these house-parties and saying, 'I am here to confess that up to the present moment I have been a Christ-rejecter'?" and they have always said, "No; that is never touched on."

You can confess every other sin and be in hell

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for eternity. The one sin you have to face is the sin of rejecting the Lord Jesus Christ. All other confession will avail you nothing. You may as well go and seek out a priest of the Roman or the High Anglican Church and hope thereby to find salvation, as to stand up in an Oxford Group house-party and confess your sins. Yet people are so easily deceived. There seems to be real humility in thus confessing one's sins, but few of us are fit to hear confessions of the sins of other people. Again and again, as a minister of the Gospel, I have to listen, when I do not want to, to the confessions of sin that come from heart-broken people. I say to them, "Do not come and tell me these things; get down here on your knees with God and tell them to Him, and tell Him that above all else you confess the sin of rejecting His blessed Son, and that now you receive Him as your Saviour." When you do that, you find life and salvation.

Let me read to you from one of their booklets entitled, "An Apostle to Youth," some of the

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impressions of an Anglican Bishop who attended one of these house-parties:

“The Minnewaska house-party, June 21, 1908, was a revelation to me. It revealed a kind of *vitality which seems to me the fundamental need of the Church and of individual Christians, men and women, today.* The good fellowship was striking, for it appeared not simply in fun and good times, but seemed to go to the very bottom of the deepest things we know or hope or fear.”

That does not sound like the work of the Holy Ghost. I do not think there was much hilarity in the upper room before Pentecost. I do not think there was much laughter, very much fun, when Peter came out of prison and went to his own company and they spent the night before God. I do not believe there was anything of that which characterized this house-party of which I am reading.

“The emphasis upon the possibility and need of daily, indeed constant, communion with God, and guidance by His Spirit, echoed the many-

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sided appeal of Saint Paul 'to the saints that are in Christ.'

"Sin was dealt with in the frank and direct way which youth demands. Nothing was glossed over, yet there was no morbidity. Chief attention, in the public meetings, was given to those sins of envy, pride, censoriousness, cowardice, sloth, uncharitableness, and insincerity which are so often fatal to fellowship and spiritual vigor, just because they are not recognized as equally serious with the gross and carnal sins. The aseptic atmosphere of these discussions owed much to the fact that the ludicrous stupidity of many sins shone out vividly in obviously sincere confession, and brought out spontaneously the cleansing laughter of the whole group."

I want you to notice the kind of sins that were confessed: "Envy, pride, censoriousness, cowardice, sloth, uncharitableness and insincerity." Some of these sins confessed were very vile, very vulgar, and it is hardly the thing to confess them in public, but they did no harm because they were

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confessed in such a ludicrous way that the cleansing laughter washed away all the filth! That is something new in theology. Personally, I never remember hearing before of the cleansing power of laughter. I have been preaching a good many years; I have seen many people washed from their sins, but I have never seen them cleansed by laughter. I have seen some who reminded me of that verse, "When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing" (Ps. 126: 1, 2). That was the joy of the Lord that came when they knew they were delivered.

"Frequent reference was made to the need of discipline, beginning with the regular observance of the morning watch, or time of quiet, but refusing to stop short of whatever is required to bring us up to our *best* in body, mind, spirit and social relationships.

"Most significant of all, I think, was the group life there described, and for a few days lived

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out by a large proportion of those present. 'Sharing,' or manifest willingness to 'share,' to the limit was at work before our eyes, and through it the Holy Spirit was giving courage to the timid, hope to those on the verge of despair, insight to the blind, in some cases life out of spiritual death, and initiating all who were willing to the hope and joy of strength that come from creative experience in the moral and spiritual realm."

That is an English Church Bishop's account of a Buchman house-party. If you can see anything in that comparable to First Century Christianity, you have a discernment that I personally know nothing about. Not a word of the sin of rejecting Christ, not a word of the necessity of trusting Him alone for salvation, not a word about the importance of confessing sin to God, not a word of turning to Him in repentance, not one syllable about the precious blood that cleanses. Something about the cleansing of laughter, but nothing of the cleansing of blood! Oh, no; we

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have been drinking of the old wine of the gospel of the grace of God, and when they proffer this new wine to us we say, "Thank you; but the old is better." We would not exchange the real fellowship we have found with Spirit-filled and blood-cleansed believers for this kind of a sham fellowship which is simply building up the first man, the man that God has condemned.

Let me go back. I say that all these five "Cs" could be true of a man that never trusted Christ, and could all be true if Jesus had never died upon the cross. Get that clearly in mind. Here are two sets of five "Cs", and we are told that if we grasp these clearly, we have the whole of the Oxford Group Movement in its essence. I claim you could have all of these if Jesus had never left the place that He had with the Father before the foundation of the world, if He had never been born at Bethlehem, if He had never sweat drops of blood in Gethsemane, if He had never hung extended a bleeding Victim on Calvary, if He had never shed His precious blood,

and never come forth in triumph from the tomb, for this entire system is one that begins with man and ends with man.

Every man's natural conscience convicts of the sinfulness of the things mentioned in these booklets; every man's conscience tells him of the evil of the sin of impurity, tells him that dishonesty is sin. You do not need the Holy Ghost for this. He convicts of the sin of rejecting the Lord Jesus Christ.

The second "C" is Contrition. We need not think it is a special evidence of the grace of God working in the soul when a man is sorry for his sins. There are tens of thousands of men in penitentiaries who are sincerely sorry that they ever forgot their responsibility to their fellow-men so far as to commit the offenses for which they have been put behind prison-bars. The sorrow of many of them is not mere remorse, but they are sincerely sorry that they ever committed the offense of which they are guilty. Unsaved men can be very contrite and yet never

turn to Christ, never trust in Him and be washed from their sins in His blood.

The third "C" is Confession. Men have been confessing their sins all down through the centuries, confessing to priests and to one another, but no priest, no human being has the power to put away sin. There is only One who can do that. When David's heart and mind were wracked with grief and sorrow because of his offense, he said, "I acknowledged my sin unto Thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord; and Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin" (Ps. 32: 5). And we read in 1 John 1: 9, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." You could confess your sins to me, you could confess them to one another, but that would never blot out your transgressions. But when you come to God in the name of Jesus, taking the lost sinner's place, then indeed you find the lost sinner's Saviour.

The fourth "C" is Conversion, and immediately you will challenge me and say, "Surely there could be no conversion apart from the divine work of Christ in the soul." Yes; there has been many a conversion that was not a work of the Spirit. During forty-two years of devoting my life to the ministry of the Word of God, I have seen a great many people whose natural consciences have been aroused; they have been troubled about their bad behaviour. Some of them were bound by one or more sins, and I have seen them come to a mourners' bench and weep and sob and ask for deliverance. I have known many of them to rise and say, "By the grace of God I am going to put these things out of my life," and for a while there was a real conversion — conversion means turning around—the man who drank stopped drinking, the man who gambled stopped playing for money, the man who was licentious endeavored to live a pure life. This went on for a time, but in many instances I have seen these people turn away, and the Scripture

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was fulfilled which says, "The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire" (2 Pet. 2:22). You see there may be a conversion which is simply a natural thing, a great stirring of emotions, bringing a man to a psychological crisis in his life where he makes up his mind he is not going to do that thing any more. This may take place even under gospel preaching, and eventually, having no root, as Jesus depicted, it withers away and there is no longer any evidence of Christianity. Spurgeon used to say, "If that sow had ever been born again, been regenerated and got a sheep's nature, it wouldn't have gone back to its wallowing in the mire." There are many people today called "backsliders" who have never been "frontsliders," who have never been born again, and consequently they go on for a time and by and by drift back into the old things. That kind of conversion is not the work of the Holy Spirit of God.

Buchman adds a fifth "C" which he calls

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Continuance. I may say that our Lord Jesus Christ makes continuance an evidence of reality, and so I am glad to accept that here. If there has been Holy Ghost conversion, definite repentance for sin, true faith in Christ, it will be manifested by continuance. But a man might continue in a mere outwardly changed life without ever having put his trust in the atoning blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. The trouble with the whole system is that it has no doctrinal background. It results eventually in faith in yourself rather than faith in a Saviour who once hung on a cross of shame crucified for our sins.

I have heard some very shocking things from members of the group, particularly from young women, as to the absurdity of any one hoping to get to heaven through the blood of Jesus. One who knows the movement well tells how he met a young woman advocate of this movement on shipboard. She was the most careless, worldly, and immodestly dressed of all the women. He said to her, "Tell me, what place

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has the precious blood of Christ in this movement?" The answer she gave was too blasphemous for me to repeat here. She ridiculed and ignored it, but he dealt with her from the standpoint that she was a lost, guilty, hell-deserving sinner and that, Buchmanite or not, if she died as she was, she would be damned forever. Before they left that ship he had the joy of having her come to him with tears streaming down her face as she said, "I have come to confess my sin to God and trust Him as my Saviour."

There are some things about this movement that seem very commendable. One is what they call, "Waiting for guidance." They place a great deal of emphasis upon that. Each one is urged in the morning to sit down quietly with the mind emptied of every thought, generally with a pencil in hand, waiting for God to say something to them. They wait and wait and wait. Sometimes they tell me nothing happens, at other times the most amazing things come. Tested by the Word of God many of these things

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are unscriptural. They lay themselves open for demons to communicate their blasphemous thoughts to them. That is not the Christian way of getting guidance. What is the Christian way? It is to get alone with God over your Bible. Not to say, "Lord, speak to me in some strange, mysterious way," but to say, "Lord, speak to me as I read Thy Holy Word." And as we read the Book, the Holy Spirit opens it up and reveals the truth of God to us, and perhaps brings such things before us as we have never before seen. Let me say to the glory of God that I am reading this old Book for the fifty-seventh time from cover to cover. You may say, "You ought to know it pretty well." I am ashamed to say that I learn very slowly. But in the morning when I sit down to read, I say, "Now, Lord, I am going to read a little of Thy Word. Let me hear Thy voice speaking to my soul." I never remember a time when I have not seen something that I have never noticed before, something I have passed over, something new, something sweet and

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precious, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit who delights to take of the things of Christ and show them unto us.

I do not entirely condemn this Oxford Group Movement—I do not know enough about it—but we have been drinking of the old wine, and when they bring this new wine, we simply say, “If you think it is all right, drink it, but for me the old is better.” The moment I find there is no emphasis upon the blood of Jesus, there is nothing in it for me.

Let me remind you of the place the precious blood of Christ has in the divine plan of salvation. In the Old Testament when it was a question of security from judgment, God said, “When I see the blood, I will pass over you.” When it was a question of making expiation for iniquity, we read, “The life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul” (Lev. 17: 11). When it is a question

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of remission of sins, we read in Hebrews 9: 22, "Without the shedding of blood is no remission." When it is a question of drawing near to God, we read in Ephesians 2: 13 that we "are made nigh by the blood of Christ." When it is a question of the fitting of the Church of God to share eternal glory with the Lord Jesus, we read, "The church of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20: 28). When it is a question of saving faith, of appropriating faith, we read, "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink His blood, ye have no life in you" (John 6: 53). When it is a question of forgiveness and redemption, we read in Ephesians 1: 7, "In whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace." In Romans 3: 9 we are told that we are "justified by His blood," and in Romans 3: 24, 25 we read, "Being justified freely by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood, to

declare His righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God." The divine guarantee of our salvation is "the blood of the everlasting covenant" (Heb. 13: 20). In 1 John 1: 7 we read, "If we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin." 1 Peter 1: 2, "Unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ." Hebrews 10: 19, "Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus." In Colossians 1: 20 we read that He has "made peace through the blood of His cross." Hebrews 9: 14, "How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" In the book of Revelation, chapter 1, verse 5, we find the saints singing, "Unto Him that loveth us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood," and then the redeemed take up the new song, "Thou art worthy, for Thou

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wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by Thy blood out of every kindred and tongue and people and nation" (Rev. 5: 9). Of that vast company saved in the great tribulation we read, "They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." Hebrews 13: 12, "That He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered without the gate." This is the old wine, the truth of the gospel; this is the message that has been used for nineteen centuries to bring untold millions to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, and we have no place for any message that comes to us in the twentieth century and says, "We are not concerned about doctrine, we are not interested in the blood; just change your life, and all will be well."

Oh, the folly of the intoxication that comes from this new wine. No, no; the old is better. We have tasted it, we have tried it, we have seen people saved all down through the years because of it. Changed lives? Oh, yes; we have seen changed lives. And today we still rely upon

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the old gospel; we are not interested in a new movement. We go back to the real First Century Christianity and come to you in the name of the Saviour, and say if you are lost, guilty, undone, if you want peace, joy, forgiveness, if you want to be right with God, come just as you are, as a poor, needy sinner, put your trust in the Lord Jesus who shed His precious blood for you, and you shall know the blessing of the divine forgiveness and a new life by the power of the Spirit and the Word of God.

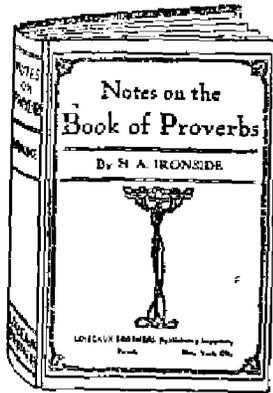
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But that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bidd’st me come to Thee,
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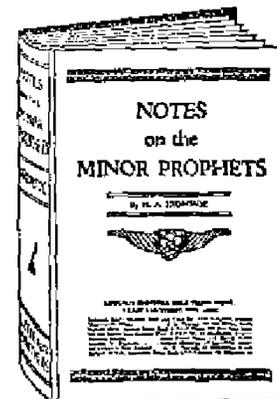
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