

ACCORDING TO THE statisticians, the number of professing Christians in the world is now 10 per cent less every forty years. We are told that this is a post-Christian age. We doubt, however, whether the news will create a flurry

among the angels, or even act as a depressant upon the Lord's "little flock" below, inasmuch as there have been post-Christian ages before. Let us illustrate.

In the sixteenth century it must have seemed that the religion of the day was a far cry from the simple faith of the churches addressed in the New Testament. Rare copies of the Bible were chained to monastery walls, more effectually sealed by the unknown sacred languages of the Old and New Testaments than by any outward inhibiting barriers to possession or understanding. Historian Roland Bainton sketches other problems confronting the Christian faith:

"... the popes of the Renaissance were secularized, flippant, frivolous, sensual, magnificent, and unscrupulous. The intelligentsia did not revolt against the Church because the Church was so much of their mind and mood as scarcely to warrant a revolt. Politics were emancipated from any concern for the faith to such a degree that the Most Christian King of France and His Holiness the Pope did not disdain a military alliance with the Sultan against the Holy Roman Empire."—"Here I Stand," page 15.

Let it not be thought that religion was *in absentia*. Quite the contrary. Religion permeated every aspect of life. On every hand could be seen steeples and spires, monasteries and priests, religious processions and shrines. Mediaeval theology induced tensions which were a far cry from the "righteousness, and peace, and joy" (Romans 14:17) of the apostolic faith, but the failure was not from the lack of trying to be good. The prevailing fashion in mediaeval piety was to provoke alternately fear and hope.

"Hell was stoked, not because men lived in perpetual dread, but precisely because they did not, and in order to instill enough fear to drive them to the sacraments of the Church. If they were petrified with terror, purgatory was introduced by way of mitigation as an intermediate place where those not bad enough for hell nor good enough for heaven might make further expiation. If this alleviation inspired complacency, the temperature was advanced on purgatory, and then the pressure was again relaxed through indulgences."—*Id.*, pages 20, 21.

#### "Near Its Death-Swoon"

This situation was not the result of any special wickedness among the church leaders of the day although, as we have seen, impiety abounded even in the most holy circles. The fact is that

THE  
CATHOLIC  
PI

Catholic man is no worse or better than Protestant man, and vice versa, for we are confronted with a return to similar degeneration of faith and practice in the Protestantism of two centuries later.

Consider England in the century preceding the Napoleonic wars. It was another of those times when true religion seemed extinct—very much a post-Christian age. Thus the famous words of Bishop Butler in his *"Analogy"*:

"It has somehow come to be taken for granted that Christianity is not so much a subject of enquiry, but that it is now at length discovered to be fictitious. . . . Men treat it as if in the present age this were an agreed point amongst all people of discernment, and nothing remained but to set it up as a principal subject to mirth and ridicule."

And according to biographer Fitchett, though Christianity indeed cannot perish, "it came near its death-swoon in that sad age."

This eighteenth century, known to us through the art of Hogarth, and the writings of Smollett, and the politics of Walpole, was truly the "Cinderella of the centuries." Carlyle summarized it thus: "Soul extinct; stomach well alive." And the historian Green asserts that open revolt against religion and the churches existed in both extremes of English society. Says he: "The poor were ignorant and brutal to a degree impossi-

ble now to realize; the rich . . . linked a foulness of life now happily almost inconceivable."

#### Christianity Temporarily Moribund

But again, as in the sixteenth century, the spiritual skies which were black with gloom and chilly with spiritual frosts were miraculously irradiated and warmed. A spiritual springtime came to Europe both in the days of Luther the miner's son, and in those of the Wesleys—parson's sons and scholars of Oxford. "Fictitious" Christianity was once more credible, and it was seen as reasonable and worth-while to deny the flesh and live for the things of the spirit.

Revivals, however, are like the taking of baths. No one of them is ever final. The human spirit quickly forgets, and becomes besmirched as it plummets earthwards. Thus we find the same cycle of events in the New World as in Europe. The early faith of the Puritans of Massachusetts cooled within a few generations, and to the "lunatic fringe" which cherished a pure faith it seemed that Christian faith was temporarily moribund. Respectability replaced regeneration, and outward conformity was substituted for spiritual vitality. Then there appeared two blazing suns as at midnight—Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield. Entire communities were transformed, with Bible reading, prayer, the singing of hymns, and

philanthropic pursuits displacing self-indulgence and frivolity.

#### What Enables the Church to Rise?

So we are led to ask the question: What is there about the gospel of Christ which enables the Church to arise repeatedly from its grave as did the fabled phoenix from its ashes? And, of course, we ask the question because of the "sickness unto death" which seems to have settled upon our own society in this existential era, this age of not only the atom and of the knowledge explosion, but of garbage, pollution, depression, and suicide. What mystical formula rescued civilization and the church in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe, and brought revival to the American colonies at a time of religious and social declension?

It was not merely a sudden augmentation of belief in God which acted as a catalyst in these ages referred to. The acknowledgment that God is, does not necessarily cheer or invigorate. Luther found that his main temptation was to hate God who both required goodness, yet permitted circumstances within and without man as made such an attainment impossible. Did not God's Book declare "the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God," and compound despair by saying also that "there is none righteous, no, not one"? 1 Corinthians 6:9; Romans 3:10.

# THE SECRET OF THE CHRISTIAN PHOENIX

Dr. Desmond Ford

Dr. Desmond Ford is a theologian, lecturer, author and teacher. He lives in New South Wales, but is about to move temporarily to the United States, where he will lecture on theology in a Christian college.

Nor was it some sudden dispensation of good advice which transformed men and communities. Wisdom has been available in all ages, but man's inordinate self-love has prevented him doing what wisdom indicated. Paul's experience is that of all men—"the good that I would I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do." Romans 7:19. All human resolutions regarding reformation have proved ever to be like piecrusts made to be broken.

### The Wonderful Key

The mystical key to personal and communal transformation or resurrection is nothing more or less than the Christian teaching of the forgiveness of sins. This is the heart of the New Testament and the essence of true religion. Man can never find deliverance from sin's power until he has experienced an unshackling from sin's guilt. The theologian *par excellence* of the church is Paul, who set forth in the Epistle to the Romans the only systematic rationale of the Christian faith to be found in Scripture. According to Professor F. F. Bruce, one should be aware on taking up Romans that its study is a calculated risk with a potential for all sorts of unexpected results. Augustine, Luther, Wesley, Whitefield, Spurgeon and others have dramatically changed the world after having been themselves changed by the understanding of the message of Romans. And what is that message? Let Paul speak for himself and for God:

"Now do you see it? No one can ever be made right in God's sight by doing what the law commands. For the more we know of God's laws, the clearer it becomes that we aren't obeying them; His laws serve only to make us see that we are sinners.

"But now God has shown us a different way to heaven—NOT BY 'being good enough' and trying to keep His laws, but by a new way (though not new, really, for the Scriptures told about it long ago). Now God says He will accept and acquit us—declare us 'not guilty'—if we trust Jesus Christ to take away our sins. And we all can be saved in this same way, by coming to Christ, no matter who we are or what we have been like. Yes, all have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious ideal; yet now God declares us 'not guilty' of offending Him if we trust in Jesus Christ, who in His kindness freely takes away our sins.

"For God sent Christ Jesus to take the punishment for our sins and to end all

God's anger against us. . . . Then what can we boast about doing, to earn our salvation? Nothing at all. Why? Because our acquittal is not based on our good deeds; it is based on what Christ has done and our faith in Him. So it is that we are saved by faith in Christ and not by the good things we do."—The Living Bible, Romans 3:20-28.

### Redeemed by the Second Adam

Similarly, the last verses of Romans, chapter 5, repeatedly refer to righteousness as a gift. We are told there that as surely as we were ruined by Adam without our having had anything to do with the matter, similarly we were redeemed by Christ, the second Adam, again without our having had anything to do with that redemption. As certainly as life's best things physically are free—sunshine, air, the produce of the soil; as certainly as life's best things socially are free—friendship, sympathy, love; so righteousness, life's best thing spiritually, is "without money and without price"—it is the gift of the grace of God procured by One who took upon Himself all our guilt that we might be accounted as having all His righteousness. See 2 Corinthians 5:14-21. At Calvary, the whole human race died in its Representative, Christ, and now whosoever believes is "justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law. . . ." Acts 13:39.

It was this good news which led Luther to declare that upon learning it he felt himself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into Paradise. It was this which Tyndale, the most noted of all Bible translators, said made a man's heart to sing for joy and his feet to dance. It was this that ended a barren ministry for John Wesley and made him a warming beacon for the spiritually icy and dark eighteenth century, saving England from a revolution similar to that of France. It was this that ended years of unrelieved depression for Charles Spurgeon and transformed him into the greatest preacher since Paul. No wonder J. I. Packer has said that "justification by faith has been the central theme of the preaching in every movement of revival and religious awakening within Protestantism from the Reformation to the present day."—Introduction to *"The Doctrine of Justification,"* page 2.

### Wesley's Experience

Why are religious people, even religious leaders, so slow to accept

God's good news? Because every man, regardless of his church affiliation or lack of it, is at heart a Pharisee. He believes he can establish his own righteousness and that then God will love him. A close study of the diary of John Wesley shows the spiritual pilgrimage of many. Note his biographer's comment:

"He had sat at the feet of many instructors and had read many books. He had been a sacerdotalist, an ascetic, a mystic, a legalist, all in turns—nay, all together! And yet, through all these stages, he had persistently misread the true order of the spiritual world. He believed that a changed life was not the fruit of forgiveness but its cause. Good works, he held, came before forgiveness and constituted the title to it; they did not come after it and represent its effects. He had, in every mood of his soul, that is, missed the great secret of Christianity, lying so near, and level to the intelligence of a child; the secret of a personal salvation, the free gift of God's infinite love through Christ; a salvation received through Christ and by faith; a salvation attested by the Spirit of God and verified in the consciousness."—W. H. Fitchett, *"Wesley and His Century,"* page 128.

What had Fitchett read in Wesley's biography which revealed the secret of that giant's original poverty, and ours? Note the following extracts, beginning with his childhood and continuing on into his manhood.

"I was carefully taught that I could only be saved by universal obedience; by keeping all the commandments of God; in the meaning of which I was diligently instructed. . . . But all that was said to me of inward obedience, or holiness, I neither understood nor remembered. So that I was indeed as ignorant of the true meaning of the law as I was of the gospel of Christ."

[As a schoolboy] "And what I now hoped to be saved by was: (1) Not being so bad as other people; (2) having still a kindness for religion; (3) reading the Bible, going to church, and saying my prayers."

[In later years before conversion] "And by my continued endeavour to keep His whole law, inward and outward, to the utmost of my power, I was persuaded that I should be accepted of Him, and thought I was even then in a state of salvation."

[After failure as a missionary] "I was strongly convinced that the cause of that uneasiness was unbelief, and that the gaining of a true, living faith was the one



thing needful' for me. But still I fixed not this faith on its right object; I meant only faith in God, not faith in or through Christ. I knew not that I was wholly devoid of this faith but only thought I had enough of it."

In contrast we have the testimony recorded in his diary after he heard Luther's words regarding justification: "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

#### Just As We Are

It is possible to be so near to success and yet so far away. So much that is taught in religion is right, but not quite right, true but not entirely true. It is true that God seeks our obedience to all His commandments, but it is NOT true that salvation comes as a result of our law keeping. See Galatians 3:10, R.S.V. It is true that a man must have faith and repent and confess his sins, but it is not true that these are to be sought before coming to Jesus. It is as we come, *just as we are*, that faith, repentance and confession are born along with the new heart that is ever the fruit of looking to Christ and away from self. We are indeed saved by works—but they are Christ's works, which climaxed in the cross. It is indeed true that all true Christians obey, but they obey not to be Christians, but because they have already become such by trusting in Christ. Christ, and Him alone, is all that we are needing. Strength, willingness, and all else in the Christian life come with the seeing.

Does your life reflect the sombre tints of Luther's world or Wesley's? What to do then? In the beautiful words of one who has followed in this century the footsteps of Luther and Wesley:

"If we are conscious of our needs, we should not devote all our powers to mourning over them. While we realize our helpless condition without Christ, we are not to yield to discouragement, but rely upon the merits of a crucified and risen Saviour. . . . Although millions who need to be healed will reject His offered mercy, not one who trusts in His merits will be left to perish.

"The believer is not called upon to make his peace with God; he never has nor ever can do this. He is to accept Christ as his peace, for with Christ is God and peace."—E. G. White.

Good, merry and glad tidings, which indeed make a man's heart to sing and his feet to dance! ★★

# Justification



The hourglass tips and slants,  
And crashes to the ground—  
Splintering Time  
Into a thousand useless fragments—  
The sound of smashing moments  
Fills my ears until they seem  
To burst—

Time—so precious,  
Yet so irrevocably  
Lost—

Along the shores of memory  
The old crane creeps,  
Tasting the twilight dreams  
Discarded by the sea,  
Sifting endless handfuls,  
Gravelling on her knees—  
Searching, searching—  
For the hourglass sands—

Soon the tide will ebb  
And she will go—  
The glass, once broken,  
Cannot be refilled—

—Sally Hammond—