

Two Lectures on the Gospels

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TWO LECTURES ON THE GOSPELS

THE nineteenth century has been an eventful period in the study of the Bible as well as in other departments of learning. Ancient documents of great importance have been discovered, and many very fruitful investigations have been made upon special points, by the aid of which we are enabled to attack with larger resources and a better hope of success the great problems that still remain unsolved. But the condition of New Testament study is in one point very different from that of Old Testament study. There is no dominant theory before us like that of Graf and Wellhausen, who, by putting the Prophets before the Law, have enabled us for the first time to see the history of Israel in its true perspective. The older

traditions about the origins of the New Testament are much more trustworthy than those about the Old, and the greatest advance has been not so much in new dates for the documents as in the way that the investigators have come to look at them. In a word, the position gained has been the general adoption of the historical point of view.

From the historical point of view the scholar aims at seeing things as they were, taking account of the struggles and even the prejudices of the time under consideration, while seeking as far as possible to forget the controversies and prejudices of his own day. The business of the historian is to trace the course of past events; to explain, rather than to judge. Put in the abstract it sounds rational enough, but as a matter of fact the conditions under which this ideal could be even faintly realised in the case of New Testament study have never been present before our own days.

In the Middle Ages the dominant theory of the Christian Church had no rivals. Men did not know of and could hardly conceive a state of things in which the machinery of Catholicism did not exist. There could be but little Biblical

criticism, little independent study of the Bible, because the Bible was authenticated by the unchallenged authority of the Church, and it was believed to exist for the purpose of proving the Church's doctrine. With the Reformation came a new era. One of the chief weapons of all parties of the Reformers had been the patent discrepancy between the Church as then governed and the Church as portrayed in the New Testament. For a moment, as it were, the Bible had been looked at with an open eye. But the results of that hasty glance were so far-reaching that Protestants turned away from further unprejudiced study to make good the position they had already won. The Reformers of the sixteenth century broke with the Roman polity and refashioned their church to what they considered to be the Apostolic model. Some, like Calvin and Knox, built it up afresh from the ground; others, like the English Reformers, were content with what our architects are fond of calling a *thorough conservative restoration*. But when the age of reconstruction was passed, the energies of Protestant scholars were set to a task not essentially different from those

of their Catholic brethren : they were more occupied in proving the doctrines of their own communion out of the New Testament than in setting themselves to investigate the true characteristics and development of the early Church.

In the eighteenth century matters were even less favourable to historical research. It was an age of theory, an age of vigorous and rigorous demonstration. Men wrote and argued whether Christianity was "true" or "false" : they did not ask "how did Christianity grow up?" Of course we all believe that the universe is governed by law and not by caprice ; things really do come to pass with the utmost vigour and rigour. But our ignorance of some to us most interesting phases and aspects of early Christianity is so profound that ready-made theories of how things ought to have happened are often falsified by the event.

As I said at the beginning, the nineteenth century has been an eventful period in New Testament criticism ; in many ways it has marked a new era. This is partly due to discoveries of unknown or lost documents which