

Why should Charles Voysey
be supported?

A LETTER TO A FRIEND,

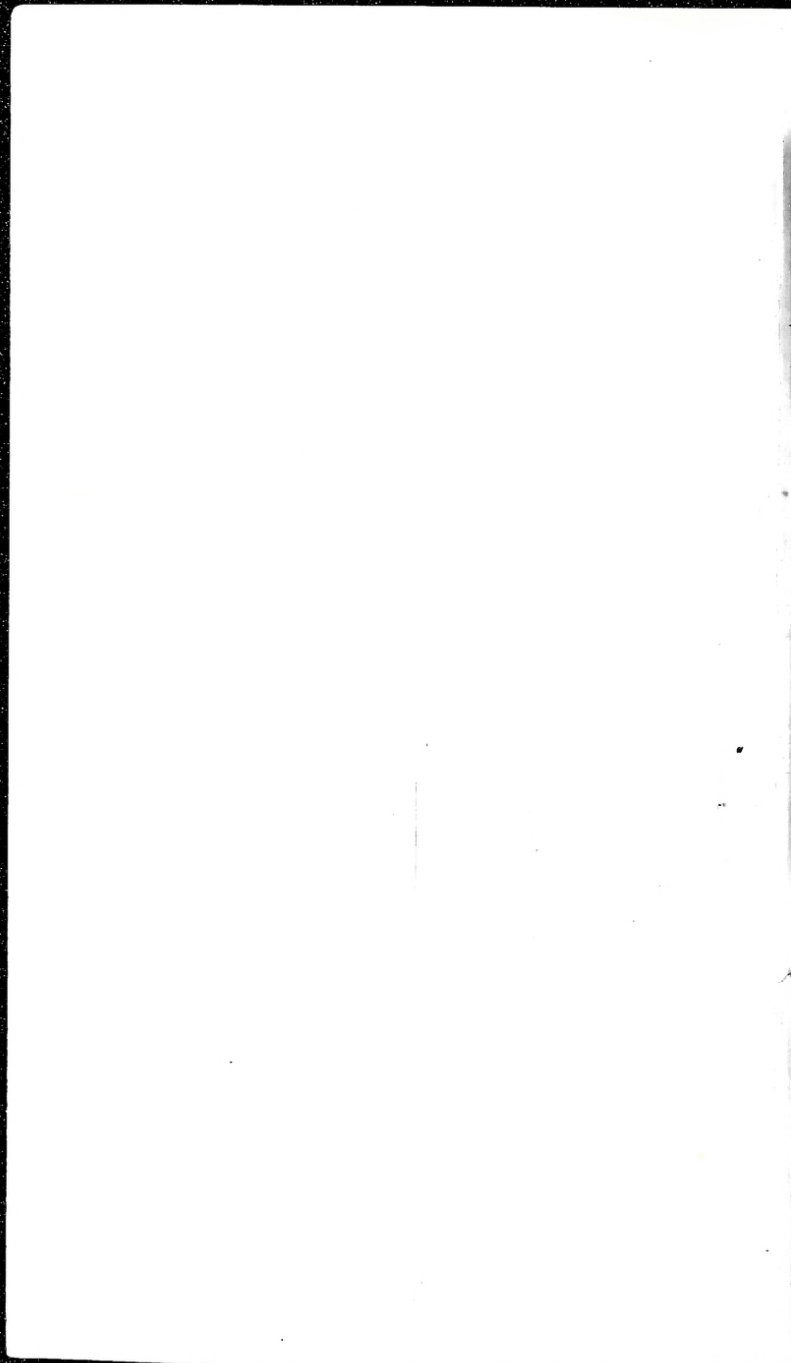
FROM

A MEMBER OF THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS.

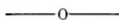
*It may be well to inform the reader that neither the writer
nor his correspondent are connected with
Manchester Meeting.*

LONDON:
PROVOST & CO., HENRIETTA ST., COVENT GARDEN.

1871.



WHY SHOULD CHARLES VOYSEY BE SUPPORTED?



MY DEAR FRIEND,

I thank thee for thy letter received a few days ago. It is always interesting and useful to have a plain honest opinion and judgment, especially when they differ from our own. I fully agree with much that thou says, but not by any means with all.

It seems to me that Charles Voysey is a man who has sacrificed every outward consideration for the sake of his religious convictions, that he is able to say as few men of the present generation can—"I have left all, and followed Thee." More than this, there is abundant evidence that he is a man of a deeply earnest religious spirit. This is amply sufficient to command the sympathy of all who really value religious liberty, and freedom of religious thought; and who believe it to be the highest duty and privilege of man to follow that Light which is revealed in his own soul, and the Guide which speaks to him there. This alone ought to be quite sufficient to command the sympathy of every Quaker.

It is not needful to enquire whether there is a theological agreement before extending sympathy and help. By so doing we assist in keeping up the old and still prevalent idea that Dogma and Creed must be the basis of religious fellowship. This idea is the basis of sectarianism and the parent of all that intolerance and

want of charity, which have more or less disgraced the history of every organized church and ecclesiastical body.

Thou says thou art ignorant of my "theological position," and enquires if I "share Charles Voysey's opinions"; and thou "regrets to think of my name being cast in with his." As a matter of fact, there are many points on which I differ widely from him, more widely probably than thou dost. In my apprehension, he looks at many passages in the Bible, and at much of its teaching, from a partial point of view, and mistakes its real character.

Much reference has been made to the manner in which Charles Voysey treats the character of Jesus Christ. I understand the position he takes to be this. If certain things which the New Testament records concerning the sayings and doings of our Lord are true, then His character cannot have been what it is asserted to have been. Hence the conclusion is that the Bible records have, in these respects, come down to us incorrectly or imperfectly.

This is such an important item in the accusations made against Voysey, that, at the risk of seeming tedious, I must quote some illustrations from his writings. The following beautiful passage speaks for itself:—

"If my temper towards some chief priests in my own age makes me read with delight those revilings of the chief priests by Jesus, and feel glad at the abuse poured upon them, it reveals to me the fact that I am stirred by revengeful or, at least, very angry feeling—that I am in a state of hatred. But if I prefer to think of Jesus as one who did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth, who, when He was reviled, reviled not again, when He suffered, He threatened not, I am aware that my temper is improved, and that I prefer the more gentle and patient picture by reason of my own progress. In this way, if we do not actually make our

own image of Jesus, we at all events change it at will, taking away features that we have ceased to reverence and admire, and adding others that we have learned to consider still more noble than we have ever worn. Whatever is to us loveliest, purest, gentlest, most loving, most manly, that is to us our Christ; and so long as His name is cherished in the hearts of men, and taken up adoringly on their lips, it will surely stand as a sign or symbol of what God wishes us to be; and His loving life and loving death will be to us the example of what He wishes us to do. In any case, we must own that, if St. Peter's account of Jesus be the truest, few, if any, of our race have yet reached so high a perfection. He is still the firstborn among many brethren, and none can dispute His right to be called the 'Shepherd and Bishop of our souls.'* *

The nature of Voysey's belief in Christ as our Saviour appears in the next passage :—

“ God's work of salvation is never ended ; for, as we rise higher and higher, the attainments we thought so good become hardened into habits, and cease to be virtuous ; while the weaknesses which we once excused are regarded no longer with leniency, but must be conquered and trampled down as sins. And God uses men and women to help Him in his work of salvation. Good fathers and good mothers, good husbands and good wives, faithful friends, and good masters and good servants, are all saviours, as much and more so to us than the noble army of martyrs and the glorious company of apostles and prophets. So too, only in the highest degree, the Lord Jesus Christ is our Saviour, enlightening the world by His own beautiful life, and by the good news of a Heavenly Father's love, which He brought into the darkness of a despairing world. Whatever helps to reveal the constant love of God the

* Sermons, vol. iii. pp. 231, 232.

Father for us all—whatever helps to rekindle our dying love for Him, and for each other,—that, in the best sense, is a means of salvation. And wherever men and women are, in however slow a degree, amending their lives, and becoming more and more a blessing and happiness to those around them, whatever be their creed, there surely is the Almighty and Most Merciful God at work ‘redeeming their lives from destruction, and crowning them with loving-kindness and tender mercies.’”*

Voysey constantly expresses the highest reverence for the character of Christ, and his aim is to remove blemishes which he believes the Scriptures themselves place upon it. Whether the passages in question are susceptible of a different meaning and complexion than that which he gives to them is another matter altogether.

Thy letter specially refers to the conclusion of Voysey’s recent “Lecture on the Bible,” where he comments on Jesus saying to His mother, “Woman, behold thy Son.” Even if we admit the adjectives which he applies to this scene, it is perfectly clear from the context that Voysey looks upon the account as false, and in no way accuses Christ of acting in a manner which he so deprecates.

I cannot resist again quoting from his writings, to show how Voysey endeavours to teach men to follow Christ:—

“ ‘Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross, and follow me.’ We call ourselves the disciples and followers of our Lord . . . but the majority of us Christians are about as ignorant of the character and work of Christ as the apostles were. Few ever think of Him as ‘one who came to bear witness unto

* Sermons, vol. ii. pp. 10, 11.

the truth,' and as one whose great object was thereby to deliver men's souls from bondage, and to save them from their sins. Most of us Christians either forget or do not even know the meaning of Christ's coming to bear witness unto the Truth, to live and die for it; while many of those who contemplate the death and passion of our Lord regard it only as a means of deliverance from everlasting punishment. . . . God's call is to speak the truth boldly, let the consequences be what they may; man's advice is to be very cautious, and not at all bold, and to be guided entirely by reference to the consequences. This is the Church of to-day, and I deliberately, but sorrowfully, say, we neither understand Christ, nor follow Him. If any will truly come after Him, at however humble a distance, he can only do so by 'denying himself and taking up his cross.' . . . I have been speaking much, if not altogether, in reference to the clergy—to the following Christ in teaching unpalatable truth. But there is even a far more important following of Him than this, to be done day by day, by each and all of us, in our own homes, where every one ought to give way and to deny himself that he may do better for others. The crosses of life are not always heavy, but they are daily and constant, and it just makes all the difference between a true and a false following of Christ, whether we systematically refuse to bear our own cross, laying it or trying to lay it upon some one else instead, or take it up submissively and cheerfully, as something doubly precious and sanctified, as sent by God for the good of our souls, and as sent also by Him as a means of comforting and saving the lives of others. . . . Our true reward, our highest happiness on earth as well as in heaven, depends on our following Christ, not merely in the great and rare struggles of the human mind after truth and liberty, but also, and most of all, in our daily living in a spirit of true self-denial, and seeking only the peace and welfare and happiness of those around us. Let us pray then that, both in our public and private callings, the

same mind may be in us which was also in Christ Jesus. For, 'if any man have not the spirit of Christ, he is none of His.' *

"They rightly judged that God had reversed the ignorant judgment of men—that Him whom men had rejected and crucified, God had exalted to highest happiness above, and to the position of Prince and Lord in the hearts of His followers. They rightly judged that 'God had highly exalted Him, and given Him a name which is above every name'—subject only to God Himself, who is, and was, and will for ever be, our all in all. This is right and proper loyalty to Jesus Christ as the noblest of the Sons of God whom the eyes of men had ever seen." †

Thou uses the expression—"follower of Charles Voysey." There is nothing which he himself would more strongly deprecate. In a private letter, written a few months ago, he says:—"Truly I am glad I am what I am! A poor and undignified country parson. Had I been a Bishop, what shoals of worldly, frivolous, pandering followers I might have had, men whose souls were barren, dry, and empty, and as really irreligious as the blind devotees of the Stock Exchange or the Race-course. As it is, all my work is simply the conquest of Truth over prejudice, error, ignorance, and every worldly influence. The man is forgotten in what he says. And so it should ever be; for all the Truth he utters is God's, and not his at all. I cannot accept the title of Guide. All I want is to lead men to their only Guide—the God of Truth and of Love, and to regard those who are privileged to speak Truth, as only fellow-labourers, full of faults and errors—'earthen vessels'—into which some little Divine Treasure has been poured. It has been the great mistake of humanity

* Sermons, vol. iv. pp. 99—104.

† Sermons, vol. iv. pp. 35, 36.

to surround the teacher with a halo which serves to conceal his imperfections, and at the same time to dazzle the observers. For this reason, Paul the Apostle left on record his painful humiliation, which, for want of an interpreter, has never had its due weight in keeping his followers from regarding him as infallible. The whole blunder and perversion of Christianity to-day, has been owing to the calling of Jesus 'Lord, Lord,' instead of doing God's will as He directed us. I have a horror of being thought to be more than I am, or of standing even for one moment on my own authority, as a dictator to the minds and hearts and lives of my fellow-men."

We may well say, "How are the mighty fallen," when such a man as this does not receive the united moral support of the Society of Friends. The real reason of this is, that the Society of Friends has become one of the Churches and Sects, out of which it was George Fox's mission to call the Children of God. It is impossible that thy "liberal Friend correspondent," whose letter thou quotes, can have any comprehension of Voysey's spirit when he says, "We are to cease to listen to Christ, and hearken to the Rev. Charles Voysey." The spirit of Quakerism teaches us to follow no man, neither Fox, Penn, Barclay, nor Voysey.

William Penn, in his Preface to George Fox's Journal, speaking of the first "Friends," says:—

"They directed people to a principle by which all that they asserted, preached, and exhorted others to, might be wrought in them, and known through experience to them, to be true. Which is a high and distinguishing mark of the truth of their ministry. Both that they knew what they said, and were not afraid of coming to the test. For as they were bold from certainty, so they required conformity upon NO HUMAN AUTHORITY, but upon conviction. And the conviction of this principle, they asserted, was in them that they preached unto. And unto that they directed them, that

they might examine and prove the reality of those things which they had affirmed of it, as to its manifestation and work in man. And this is more than the many ministries in the world pretend to. . . . Which of them all pretend to speak of their own knowledge and experience? or ever directed men to a Divine principle or agent, placed of God in man, to help him? And how to know it, and wait to feel its power to work that good and acceptable will of God in them."

In George Fox's writings he constantly testifies to the same thing:—That "the Light which every man that cometh into the world is enlightened with, is the salvation to the ends of the earth"; that "this was Christ's doctrine," that "this Light is Christ, the substance, the righteousness of God." He says:—"How is man's salvation wrought out but by the power of Christ within? How is the old man destroyed but by Christ within? . . . Who feels Christ within feels salvation."*

And Charles Voysey says:—

"God or Love is the Father of the Divine Nature of Jesus and of men. He has begotten us all, and as children of Him we possess part of His own life and spirit. . . . I know there is plenty of wickedness amongst us, quite enough even in the best of us to say—'Father, I have sinned against Thee, and am no more worthy to be called Thy Son,'—to make us echo the Apostle's graceful apostrophe, 'Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God!' But then how could we tell that God is so good, and that we are unworthy of His Fatherhood, if it were not that God is already dwelling in us and revealing Himself to us? No book, nor word of man, nor word of Jesus, could of itself make us feel what God is, and why we are unworthy of our high calling as His Sons. This is only and

* See many passages, especially in vol. iii. of G. F.'s Works. American edition.

solely due to God's indwelling—to the Spirit which He Himself has begotten in us. Therefore as God was in Christ, so in like manner, though not yet in like degree, He is in us, or we should never have been able to learn any truth about Him, or to feel our sonship, or to bewail our own unworthiness. . . . Let us thankfully accept at the lips of Jesus the assurance of a tie between ourselves and our Heavenly Father which nothing can ever break. For if Jesus dwells eternally in the bosom of the Father, so also do we; for His Father is our Father, and His God is our God.*

It is to my mind an entire perversion of the true facts of the case, to speak of "the disastrous effects which the support given to Charles Voysey has had at Manchester." Rather should we speak of the disastrous effects produced by the undue assumption and exercise of ecclesiastical power,—the same old story, and the same old temptation, into which Churches have ever fallen.

I hope thou wilt excuse the extreme plainness with which I have written, and that my meaning is also plain. I hope also I do not lose sight of the dangers from which thou warns me;—that it may be quite possible, even with the best intentions, to pursue a mischievous course, and one which is prejudicial to the cause we have most at heart. At the meeting which I attended in London, I expressed the belief that the worst thing we could do would be to take any action which would tend to form a "sect of Voyseyites." This feeling was united with by the meeting. So far as I can understand the spirit which is now guiding Charles Voysey's line of action, it may be summed up in the following extract from one of his later sermons:—

"If a man is convinced that he has found a faith more true, more helpful, more consoling, than other

* Sermons, vol. iv. pp. 206, 208.

faiths which are common in his time, it is surely that man's duty to try and teach that faith to his fellow-men. In proportion as he himself has found it to be more elevating, more comforting, more consistent with reason and experience, so surely he ought to be more eager and constant in proclaiming his own faith, and in doing what he can to lead others to embrace it also. I am one of those who think they have found a nobler faith, and I feel sure that my faith is to be found in the Bible, and that it was taught by the Hebrew Prophets and Psalmists, and by Jesus of Nazareth most of all." *

The great need of the present time seems to me to be the preaching of a religion of Life—not of doctrine—not of belief. That God is the Father of ALL men, and will instruct all men in the way in which they are to walk. This is the substance of Charles Voysey's teaching. He is at the present time its representative man. Therefore he must be supported; notwithstanding he may at times be mistaken, and even say harsh, weak, or bitter things. I have felt and do feel it a privilege to have rendered him some little moral and material help, and to have been the means of conveying to him from others, both material and spiritual expressions of sympathy.

I am, thy friend sincerely,

* * * * *

1. viii. 1871.

* Sermons, vol. iv. p. 3.