

Jesus and Judaism

and

The Emphasis of Jesus

By
Henry J. Cadbury

SHREWSBURY LECTURE

THE SHREWSBURY LECTURES

Shrewsbury “Meeting was already established in 1672, when George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, visited America. He says in his Journal, published by Cambridge University Press: “And soe wee came to Shrewsberry & on the first day of the weeke wee had a pretious meetinge... & friends & other people came farr to this Meetinge; & on ye 2d of the 7th month wee had a mens (& weomens) Meetinge, out of the most parts of ye new Country Jarsie, which will be of great service in keepinge ye Gospell order & Government of Christ Jesus...and there is a Monthly & A Generall Meetinge sett up and they are buildinge A Meetinge place in the midst of them.”

In preparation for the tercentenary, in 1972, of George Fox’s visit to America. an annual Shrewsbury Lecture is given on some basic aspect of Quakerism. A particular phase of the special emphasis which Quakerism gives to the Christian message is presented. The community and Monmouth County in particular are invited on this occasion, known as Old Shrewsbury Day, to join with Friends who “came farr to this Meetinge” to learn together from him who is the Light of the World.

Jesus and Judaism
and
The Emphasis of Jesus

By
Henry J. Cadbury

SHREWSBURY LECTURE

Given at
Shrewsbury Friends Meeting
Highway 35 and Sycamore Avenue Shrewsbury, New Jersey
Sixth Month 17 and 18, 1961

JOHN WOOLMAN PRESS, INC.
4002 North Capitol Avenue
Indianapolis 8, Indiana

1962

HENRY J. CADBURY

In addition to his work on the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Henry Cadbury is the author of eight books on New Testament studies and a contributor to the Interpreter's Bible. He is a leading authority on the book of Luke-Acts and on the historical Jesus. His book The Peril of Modernizing Jesus was published in 1937, Jesus: What Manner of Man, in 1947; and The Book of Acts in History, in 1955.

From 1934 to his retirement in 1954 he was Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard. He has also held various teaching positions with Andover Theological Seminary, Episcopal Theological Seminary (Cambridge, Mass.), Haverford, and Bryn Mawr and is now a trustee of the latter.

He is Clerk of Worship and Ministry for Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and served as Chairman of the American Friends Service Committee for over 20 years.

Since his retirement from Harvard, he has been lecturing at Haverford College and at Pendle Hill—a Quaker center for graduate-level religious and social studies.

“The New Testament clearly sets out Christ as fully human and as fully divine... It is a pity that we insist on using the terms ‘humanity’ and ‘divinity’ as though they implied opposition... But of one thing we can be certain—there are depths beneath depths, and heights above heights in the personality of Jesus which make rash generalizations or superficial solutions absurd.”

Statement by Yorkshire Quarterly Meeting. 1919

Jesus and Judaism

It may seem a little cold to approach Jesus from just an historical background. But all of us have inherited or acquired certain attitudes toward this historical figure. We are apt to think of Jesus as having a Christian background, and much of our thought about him is colored by centuries of interpretation. Yet it is necessary to know the Jesus of history before we can have a firm foundation for the Jesus of Christianity. Because of the centuries that have intervened you may protest: "We haven't any right to expect to know something about the nature of this figure-this prominent figure, this influential figure in history so long ago!"

Of course, when we gather in this meeting house, other historic figures are in our minds. One might well have said what can we know about George Fox who resuscitated a man here in 1672 after he had been thrown from his horse and was thought dead? The thing to do about Fox would be to look at the time he lived, find out what the religious situation was in England in the period in which he lived, and then see how George Fox fits into that background.

That is what I propose to do with Jesus. I am taking the figure of Jesus and saying that a reasonable way for us to begin to look at him is to take the religious environment in which he lived, in which he grew up, and in which he carried on his ministry, and see what his relation was to that background. So the subject that has been chosen is the relation between Jesus and Judaism. Of course, by Judaism, I mean the Judaism of his time. It wouldn't do to take George Fox and compare him with the Church of England today. You want to look at George Fox and the Church of England and the other religious groups of his time.

In doing this, we are doing what is commonly done with other historical figures. A great many books are written about the "life and times" of somebody. and the times means the background and environment which throw light on the person whose life is being considered. In applying this to Jesus, the first thing we have to do is to ask what we know about the Judaism in Palestine in the first century of what we call the Christian Era. and how does Jesus fit into that. What was his relation to it? Was he part of it? Now this is a subject which, of course, one studies from other sources besides the New Testament. One can read about Judaism and learn about Judaism in this period from a great many books that are not in our New Testament, although Leo Baeck, the famous Berlin rabbi. reverses the procedure in a recent book where he uses the Gospels to know more about first-century Judaism. But they are not the only source. More and more Christian scholars and Jewish scholars have in the last generation or two come to study and to understand the religion of the Jews in Palestine at the time when Jesus lived. This study has progressed so that it is possible to get a pretty clear idea of what Judaism was like at this time, and the more we know about Judaism in this period, the more we see that Jesus and the Gospel story fit into that background.

When you read the Gospels, while you know that the language comes down to us in Greek, you can also see that some of the phraseology is not Greek phraseology but Jewish phraseology.

When you come to the events that are told, the places that are mentioned, the questions that are raised, you see that they fit into our knowledge of first-century Judaism. It is very important when you read the Gospels to remember that you are not reading about our own time. You are reading about a past and quite alien time, a quite alien civilization. You are dealing with people whose way of thinking is 1900 years old and not up to date. This is not said in any invidious sense, but if you want to understand a person, you need to understand the situation in which he lived and the way he and the people of his time thought; and Jesus fits into this picture. Modern scholars have come a long way toward recovering the portrait of Jesus by recovering the situation in which he lived.

Judaism, of course, was already an old religion then. It had had many hundreds of years to develop. In the years when Jesus was living in Palestine it had taken on pretty definite forms. In many ways it was a very homogeneous religion. It was a religion that had developed among the religions of the ancient world into a characteristic emphasis of its own. It believed, for example, in a certain God and only one God, and that was very different from a great many other religions. It believed in a God who was a God of righteousness, not of whim. It believed in a God who had revealed his will in the past in a way that was written down in the Books of the Law and secondarily in the other Books of the Old Testament. The Jews, then, were a people of a Book. They were a religious people tied to and dependent upon a Book, and definitely worshipping the same God with one another and believing, all of them, that it was their business to do that God's will and that God's will could be found in the teachings of these earlier Books.

That is the kind of situation into which Jesus came. He shared a great many of these ideas. He believed in this God. Probably neither he nor his contemporaries ever raised any questions about this God. There was nothing called atheism in this period. There were people, of course, in other countries worshipping other gods. But as for the Jews, all kinds of them, they were the people, the dedicated and committed people, belonging to this particular God. I say this particular God. They had gone so far as to claim that He was the only God, quite contrary to the view of their neighbors. But historically, it was a case that the God of a given people had emerged so that for that people at least He was to all intents and purposes the only God—certainly the only one for whom they cared, the only one to whom they had any responsibility. What they did with the gods of other peoples is another question.

Jesus, then, came into this environment. I have no doubt that he was born a Jew. We have some genealogies that show his Jewish background and even if those were not altogether authentic, there is every reason to believe that he was of the Jewish race. There have been people who thought he was not Jewish. A man named Rosenberg in Germany under Hitler developed a theory from an Englishman named Chamberlain that Jesus was really an Aryan. Both the Englishman on one hand, and Hitler and Rosenberg on the other, had ulterior purposes in assuming he was not Semitic. I am assuming that he was, and I think that everything points that way. He was a Semite and among the Semites he belonged to that group we call Jewish. And he is very much a Jew. He is much more of a Jew than he is like a Christian! He had more in common with the people that put him to death, than he had in common with the people today who worship him.

This is because he was to all intents and purposes a Jew. That is part of my answer to his relationship to Judaism. His relation to Judaism is that he is part and parcel of it, in it, and of it, and sharing it, and altogether a member racially and religiously of this group of first-century Jews.

This may come sometimes as a shock to modern Christians to be told that he was a Jew. A little boy in Sunday School came home one day and said to his mother: "Do you know what the teacher told us today in Sunday school?" "No," said the mother. "what did she say?" "Well," said the little boy, "what she told us was that Jesus was a Jew. I never had thought of that before. I always knew that God was a Presbyterian, but I never knew before that Jesus was a Jew."

The little boy was right and the teacher was right. The beginning of wisdom in understanding Jesus is to put him back where he belonged—in the environment from which he flourished and out of which he grew. If you don't put him in that environment, you make the same mistake that you might with any other historical person. If you begin dealing with George Fox as though he were an Asian or if you begin dealing with Martin Luther as if he were a Hindu, you don't get anywhere. Similarly, you don't get anywhere with Jesus until you put him back into the cultural area in which He belongs.

The Gospels make this so obvious that I don't see why we so often forget it. Take the names of Jesus' family. They are all good Jewish names: Mary, his mother; Joseph, his father, his own name which is Joshua; his brothers, Simeon, Judas, James and [sic, should be *or* since these are the same name] Jacob, and another Joseph were the five brothers in the family—all had good Jewish names, names of Jews of the past. When you meet a family that is called Tom, Dick, and Harry, you say to yourself that this is a familiar cultural element. But you may get another list of names that you know are not Anglo-Saxon. So here you have this bit of Semitic background. You have another with the language that Jesus speaks. The language he uses, we recall, is very characteristically Jewish.

As one type of illustration of this, there are several ways of using figures of speech for things which are big or small. We say that we picked something out of our eye that was as small as a pinhead or a grape seed. We select some little thing for comparison. Or we say I saw an animal that looked as big as an ox. We don't have much to do with oxen today, but this is an habitual figure for what is very big in the animal realm, and so it is used for other objects. This is something that becomes part of a culture. The Germans have their phrases for the big and the small. The Italians have theirs. When I read an Italian rook, I get these figures. Even though they are not familiar to me, I recognize that this is the way that Italians describe these things. So it is when I read the Gospels and have Jesus talk not about an ox, but a camel; and not about a speck, but a gnat; or talk about something in your eye as a beam. When he talks about an aperture he doesn't say that it is a hole big enough for a golf ball to go through, but he says a hole as small as the eye of a needle. These are fixed phrases and this is the vocabulary of Jesus when he talks about these things. Of course that is only part of a man's life but Jesus' mind, and even more his thoughts can be associated with the culture in which he lived.

When I speak these days on a political subject, and there is an opportunity for questions, I know pretty well what kind of questions I am going to get, because they are going to be questions coming out of the situation in which we are living. People will say to me: “Well, what do you think about Cuba? What about the recognition of Red China? What do you think about unilateral disarmament?” These are questions I would be asked, and they are dated aren’t they? Some years ago nobody would have asked me about Cuba, or Red China, or unilateral disarmament. These are all contemporary questions.

But now if you look in the Gospels at the questions Jesus is asked, you will see the same thing. They are also what are called “topical” questions, questions that pertain to the immediate situation, the kind of questions a neighbor would ask a neighbor. One could identify them as being dated questions, some of which have a longer span than others.

You may remember one question that was asked Jesus was: “What about the authority of John the Baptist?” Well, “what do you think about Adlai Stevenson,” a name lately in the news? When they asked Jesus that question, John had been lately in the news. What about John? Was he a prophet, or wasn’t he? This is the kind of question that came up naturally.

Another question was: “How about a man’s divorcing his wife and marrying another? What do you think about that?” That is an abstract question, and might be asked any time. But something like that had happened lately. A man named Herod had done just that thing and John the Baptist had expressed himself on it, and it didn’t end very happily for John the Baptist. You know he was executed because he had spoken out on that particular subject. That was something of a \$64 question to ask Jesus in that period of time. Thirty years before, or thirty years after, it might have been a quite abstract question. But precisely at that time, following John’s death, it was a very delicate question to ask. There was one question that was perhaps even more delicate: “Is it lawful to pay tribute to Caesar?” Here he was, living in an occupied country. It was like being in northern France in 1943, let us say, and having one Frenchman say to another: “Do you think we should salute each other with a ‘Heil Hitler’?” It was a very delicate question to answer, because whichever answer you gave somebody would be offended. This is the very question that Jesus was asked, putting him on the spot, so to speak.

These illustrations show you what I mean by saying that our Gospels represent a man living in the first century, in a way that we can identify with the first century, and what we know of the language and thinking of the times.

Another question that was asked Jesus was: “Which is the great commandment?” Since there were 615 commandments in the Law, that was a pretty natural question for anybody to ask. It would be like saying to a judge of the Supreme Court: “Now what do you think is the fundamental principle of the Constitution? Just which one?” You might say to him: “Answer me this while you stand on one foot!” This demand is for a simplification, a unification of the law, or the reduction of the law to one answer, and you may remember that twice in our Gospels Jesus was replying to this sort of question. He says in one case: “What you want others to do to you, do to them!” On another occasion he says: “Thou shalt love thy God and thy neighbor as thyself!”

Now, just what does he say about this? According to Matthew he doesn't say this is my teaching, he says this is the law and the prophets. Jesus is asked not about Christianity, but about Judaism. The two summaries he gives are ones given by other rabbis of the same period, identical ones using either the same two commandments of the Old Testament, or what we call today the Golden Rule.

In these respects, then, Jesus shows himself as a Jew; as concerned with the problems of Judaism in the first century; and, as living in a community with which these were the uppermost questions.

All of the Jews of this period were more absorbed in the question of conduct than anything else. In our Christian community there are a great many other subjects that are discussed. Indeed, sometimes I think there is an overemphasis upon other aspects of religion in the modern world. But, if you go back to Judaism, you will discover that all that we know about Judaism suggests that the discussion centers around problems of human conduct. The law says we should do so and so. We should keep the Sabbath. These questions then are not the kind of questions that we should call today theological questions. They are not doctrinal questions. I can't discover that the Jews cared very much about doctrine at all. Should I make a mistake if I said that the oldest Gospels we have—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—represent Jesus saying equally little about doctrine? If we take the Sermon on the Mount for example he tells people how certain Jewish practices were carried on, especially for ostentation. In such things Jesus was very critical, and that didn't ingratiate him with the people he criticized. On the other hand some Jews liked him—a few liked him very well—and some Jews were very critical of Jesus.

Suppose we look through the Gospels to see what the Jews found fault with. One of the commonest things they found fault with was that he cured sick people on the Sabbath Day. Is that a major religious issue? As a matter of fact we know that there were two schools of thought in Judaism about curing people on the Sabbath. One school said you can cure people if they are dangerously ill. You may give them medical treatment! Of course the principle is that you are working when you make a poultice or mix a drug. On the other hand, they said, if they are not dangerously ill you will have to wait until Sunday, the next day. If Jesus cured people that had been suffering from a disease for many years, not apparently at the point of a crisis, if he cured them on a Sabbath Day, then people that followed this stricter rule would be hostile to him. On one occasion his disciples were criticized because as they went through a wheat field they picked the heads off the wheat and crushed them in their hands. They were doing this on the Sabbath Day! These Jews were strict about Sabbath rules—stricter than any of our blue laws in America today—and they criticized the followers of Jesus for doing that.

Look through the Gospels and make a list of the things that some Jews criticized Jesus for, and of the things that Jesus criticized some Jews for. In this way you can get a very human picture. We are all familiar with this kind of controversy where a man and his associates finally fall out and become mutually critical of one another. They don't pay much attention to the things they agree on, although that may be a very large percentage of their point of view.

Nearly every quarrel is over less than five per cent of what you think or do. You may agree on everything but a minor matter. People have often said to me how nonconformist do I have to be to be executed for it? My answer is, two or three per cent would be plenty. You can get to be a martyr for that small a percentage!

You can see then that the main picture one gets is that of Jesus, a largely typical Jew, living in the thought world of the first century, teaching people who think about the same subjects as he does. In speaking freely he had to differ only a little bit to get into serious trouble. The Gospels give us an accurate picture both of his agreement with Judaism, and of some of his minor points of friction.

I won't ask the question: "Who began the quarrel?" You know how it is. Once a quarrel begins each side plays the game. The moment one side criticizes, the other side criticizes back. Very often the criticisms have nothing to do with what has already been said. When we had a Civil War in this country, the north criticized the south for one thing and the south criticized the north for something entirely different. It wasn't that the north said yes and the south said no to the same question—it wasn't as clear as that. It wasn't that way with Jesus and the Jews. They said yes to many things in common. Jesus never did anything as serious as violating the Jewish prejudice against idolatry. It was in a minimum area of difference of opinion that the conflict arose. Because of this I don't find it very significant to ask what the particular points were where Jesus differed from Judaism. They weren't necessarily major points. Nor is it significant to ask if Jesus was 95 per cent right and 5 per cent wrong. He was a good Jew according to his own thought but not according to their thought. Both sides thought they were good Jews. But each side found some fault with the other. You know some of the things Jesus said about the Pharisees. He said you do these things—that is all right—but you ignore certain other things you ought to have done. And they said to Jesus some of the things you say sound to us a good deal like blasphemy. But I don't think for a moment that Jesus had any irreverent view of God, or that he felt any irreverence toward the Temple, or the Law. They thought Jesus was throwing the Law overboard. When he said something about the Temple, they understood it as sacrilege. I don't understand Jesus that way at all!

It is an interesting human situation, and all too human and all too common, where a disagreement arises between people who have so much good in common and it is blown up and exaggerated and leads, at least on the part of the Jews, to a brutal and a fatal ending—man-destroying hostility. On the side of Jesus it leads to some pretty harsh words and to deep sorrow for the extent to which his fellow countrymen—whom he loved—seem to him to go astray or to be led astray by certain leaders. Here you have Jesus weeping over the perverseness of his fellow countrymen and his fellow countrymen bringing in—of all people—the Romans, whom they hated, to have them put Jesus out of the way.

The Emphasis of Jesus

Jews were not theologically-minded people at all. Indeed some theological questions were tabooed from discussion. The rabbis who taught parallel to Jesus and before and after him recommended against abstract questions. There are some parts even of the Old Testament of which they said: "These are not very suitable for prolonged discussion! They are too theoretical, too abstract!" But when it comes to the question of what does God want people to do, then they were on ground that was familiar to them and that was congenial to them. Therefore Jesus in his teaching would not be asked these abstract questions nearly as much as he would be asked questions about the will of God for our conduct.

This then is the central emphasis of Jesus, and it fits very well into the times in which he lived. If you have a teacher today who talks about matters that are of no concern to the public, he doesn't get much heard, still less does he get executed for it. Jesus at least talked about subjects that were sensitive enough and of immediate enough interest that in the end there was a good deal of debate and controversy between him and his contemporaries.

If I may take this for granted, as being the central theme of Jesus' teaching, I ought to say something about its character and the way it has come down to us. Our Gospels, of course, do not represent the first-hand report. There was no tape recorder present when Jesus was speaking on the Mount, or when he was speaking by the seaside, and, therefore, our Gospels are merely a collection of remembered sayings of Jesus. Indeed, many of the sayings are hard to place and I don't know that they need to be placed. It is enough that Jesus said these things. Whom he said them to, or what day of the week it was, or where it took place—the unimportant things about Jesus teaching of that sort—have not been recalled as a general thing. We have just the sayings of Jesus.

On the whole, these sayings are not systematically arranged, and probably they were not systematically spoken. I don't think Jesus said to himself: "Let us see, I must outline a course of instruction, I must be very careful; I will get out my notes, and I will begin to outline what I will say." His conversation was largely casual. Persons came to him, or groups of people came to him, and apropos of some specific matter that was before them, he would make some comment.

Now take these comments that he made. A great many of them have been forgotten, of course. All that Jesus is recorded to have said could be said in a very short time. We have only a fragment of his actual teaching. So, we are not looking for system and not looking for a neat arrangement. We are not looking for answers to questions both modern and ancient. In trying to analyze the character of Jesus' teaching, one finds that it consists of answers to questions that bear on human conduct, although there are inferences about a few abstract questions here and there.

It is also interesting to note the contrast between the part of Jesus' teaching that is recorded in Mark, Matthew, and Luke; and the part that is in the other Gospels. The Gospel of John and the

Gospel of Thomas, lately discovered, show how other writers had other interests. But our oldest and most authentic Gospels have this central ethical concern. This aspect of the Christian tradition—the ethical—has been the most constant element in Christian history. Even though people have not obeyed Jesus' suggestions, and have preserved them merely as counsels, they have always been part of our Christian tradition. Thus, the ethical content is not only the most authentic, but also the most continuous element in Christian history, going back as it does to the report of Jesus himself. It is very hard to talk about such material because of this rather scattered background, rather casual background, and it doesn't lend itself to systematic publication today any more than it did then.

There are people, of course, who said to Jesus: "What's the gist of your teaching?" I don't know how some of you would answer a question like that for yourself, if someone came and said: "Put in a nutshell the central beliefs you have!" If you were to ask that of a number of the members of the Society of Friends, I am sure that every one of them would give you an answer, though probably not the same answer. Yet in spite of these glib answers, books and books can be written on various subjects pertaining to the beliefs of the Religious Society of Friends. So I am very suspicious of anyone who tries to summarize the teachings of Jesus in a single phrase. You miss some of the richness and variety in his teaching if you are willing to do that. Yet of course people have tried that, and apparently Jesus was asked questions of that sort himself. His replies were mentioned in the preceding discussion.

There is a story about a man who came to Jesus and asked him: "What is the great commandment?" Jesus, like other teachers I know said to him: "Well, what do you say?" The young man was quite able to answer his own question, as most people who ask questions are! He immediately made his reply when Jesus asked him: "Well, what do you say, how do you read?" The young man said that the answer was mainly to love the Lord thy God; and secondly to love thy neighbor as thyself. In fact this summary is given in two forms in our Gospels. In one Jesus makes the summary, and in the other, the man who asks the question. It doesn't make much difference. Jesus agrees!

So then, what we have here, if you will, is an example of an attempt to reduce to a simple formula the teachings of Jesus. This kind of an answer was not at all unfamiliar to the Jews of that time. The other rabbis among them were asked the same thing. It was not an unusual question, but a common question, and the answer that he gives is an answer that other rabbis would have given too. This illustrates, at any rate, what I am saying about the incompleteness of what we have, and the difficulty of attempting to reduce the teachings of Jesus to a single rule.

There is another formulation given in the Gospels that is often quoted and this is what we call the Golden Rule. This is a passage in the New Testament which reads something like this "what you want others to do to you, do the same to them."

This again is a summary of the teachings of the Old Testament which other rabbis had used. In both these cases, according to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says about the summary that is given that this represents the law and the prophets. Jesus doesn't say: "You ask me a question,

and you ask me as a Christian what my standard is.” No, Jesus doesn’t say that. Jesus says: “What is the duty of man?” And of the summary, he says that it agrees with the gist of the Jewish religion with which you and I have lived and grown up. Any summary must be taken as rather more an impoverished, a poorer representation of the whole teaching of Jesus than we should like.

However, I will say something about the emphasis in Jesus’ teaching as a whole, in attempting to recite text after text, which one can do, since the words of Jesus in some current editions of the Bible are printed in red. It would be possible to go through the Gospels and pick out the actual words—that is, not narrative, not the words of other people—but the words of Jesus. If you picked that out in the Gospel of Matthew, Mark, or Luke it wouldn’t add up to a great deal. There is a good deal of repetition in the Gospels, and this would be the total teaching of Jesus.

There are certain things Jesus doesn’t say in the Gospels. If you remember what was said in the previous lecture, you will understand what was meant in a conversation between a Jewish rabbi and a Christian scholar. The rabbi said “there is not a word of Jesus that is not found in our own rabbinic writings.” The Christian replied that that is true, but what a lot more you have in your rabbinic writings. In other words, it was the things that the rabbis had said that Jesus didn’t say that distinguished him.

There is an essential unconscious selection in the teachings of Jesus, an unconscious emphasis, which I don’t find in the rabbinic writings. To put it another way, we are or profess to be concerned with human conduct and are very happy to tell other people what they ought to do, although we are less able to practice it ourselves. There are certain things that we emphasize that Jesus would not. He goes at it in a quite different way. There is a well known motto in the modern world that we should act so as to produce the greatest good for the greatest number. I don’t find that in Jesus. That is a sort of wholesale standard. I find rather that he says that we ought to be able to produce the greatest good in at least one person. Jesus is much more inclined to emphasize the supreme individual virtue than to try to lay down a sort of average that most people could attain to. In fact, when you ask what authority he appeals to in his teaching, it is not a philosophical kind that might lead back to the Golden Rule, to Immanuel Kant, or some of the other ethical teachers.

There is not in Jesus some of the expected emphasis. For example, I find very little in Jesus’ teaching about social justice. The word justice of which we make so much and often practice so little is not a favorite word upon his lips. He is much more concerned with love than with justice. Both of these concepts, love and justice, were familiar to the Judaism of his time and the Jews before him. Many fine Jewish teachers had raised the question: “What do you do where love and justice seem to be in conflict?” Or even at the least, they would phrase the question this way: “What does God do when love and justice are in conflict?” In a way, Jesus seems to say very little about the justice of God and a great deal about the love of God.

So, when I hear people arguing today on the ground of justice, I say that is all very well from one standard, but that doesn’t represent the major Christian standard. The major Christian stan-

dard is one of love. Again and again I think you see Jesus putting off on this matter of justice. You remember the story when a man came to Jesus and said: "Tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me!" What a reasonable thing to say! Here are two brothers. Their father died. There is an estate to settle. Obviously it ought to be settled justly. There ought to be some rule by which it would keep settled. So one of the brothers appeared before Jesus and asked him to intervene. Here is Jesus deliberately not doing something we should expect. He is saying: "I am not going to be a judge or ruler over you. You can't get me to make this decision." Then with great acuteness and perception he talks to the man about himself. He says: "Beware of covetousness, for life does not consist in the number of things you own." See how he diverts himself from this false emphasis that is demanded of him! Our common end, or salvation, would be a great deal more Christian and Christlike than it is if we could lay more stress upon love, as Jesus does, and a good deal less upon justice.

We often say that Jesus was concerned for the value of the individual, and in a sense I am sure that that is right. But there are two ways of valuing the individual. One is a sensitiveness about other people's welfare. The other is concern for our own duty. The Friends talk a lot about the Inward Light or "that of God in every man," and in so doing they are following unconsciously many of them quite ignorantly, I am afraid—the lead of Jesus in which he is concerned for the individual as an actor and not as the object of action. I don't find Jesus going around saying: "See all these poor people; you must become benevolent because these poor people need your money and these sick people need your help! You must put your entire mind on their welfare!" That is what is called altruism.

Now altruism is certainly better than some other things. but it is not quite the emphasis of Jesus. I think his emphasis is upon what is expected of you—not what is needed by other individuals, one by one, but what is expected of you individually, one by one. The motivation behind the acts that Jesus recommends does not leave out yourself. It thinks of yourself and it thinks of your own welfare. In fact in the two passages I have quoted, your own welfare is the standard. It doesn't say: "Do unto others what they would want, or what they need!" That is not the Golden Rule. It says: "Do unto others what your standard would require, or what you want done to you!" The other one says: "You shall love your neighbor"—it doesn't say "as you should love God," but "as you love yourself!" In other words, Jesus is realistic enough to know that all of us are inherently aware and concerned for ourselves, and he does not forget that when he tells us how we should behave towards other people.

This sounds very heretical by sociological standards. I don't find the social workers I know talking about this, or speaking so lightly about justice as I have just spoken. But I am trying to get at what Jesus said whether it agrees with our modern standards or not. Jesus is very sensitive to man's care about his own welfare, and he can appeal to a man to do right because he knows that man, in his heart of hearts, is uncomfortable if he doesn't do what is right. So to a certain extent in his teaching of conduct he appeals directly to a man's own desires.

Now I have said some of the things he omits. Let me say some of the things he emphasizes. One of the things he emphasizes is the positive doing of good. The teaching of Jesus isn't simply

“not.” That is characteristic of the Ten Commandments. I am not saying that he objected to them, the fact is that in many ways he goes beyond them. Jesus is much more concerned, if I may put it that way, that we should do good ourselves, rather than that we should prevent evil in others. Let me ask you what the aim of America is today. Is it mainly that we should do right ourselves no matter what; or is it that we should be very careful to stop other people from doing evil and if necessary do the same evil ourselves to prevent them? Now in contrast to that I find Jesus most indifferent. Somebody comes to him and says: “Well, what about my brother?” Jesus says to this man: “Be careful of covetousness!” And the man says: “Why don’t you tell my brother that?” Jesus stresses what he ought to do. In other words, he says that responsibility belongs to the individual concerned and it can’t be passed off onto other people. Therefore the question is: “What are you going to do?” not “What will somebody else do.”

The parable of the good Samaritan is a good example. A man comes to Jesus and says: “Who is my neighbor?” This was in reference to the commandment: “Love thy neighbor!” So Jesus tells a story. A man was in trouble. He was on the Jericho Road. It was a dark night and some robbers came upon him. It was a nasty place with a hairpin turn and a steep hill. This man was in trouble and several men came by and saw that he was in trouble but left him alone. A Levite came by and moved along. So did a priest. A third man came by. He was a Samaritan and did what someone should do. Instead of “leaving the scene of the accident” he tended to the man who had been robbed. He helped him out! It is a very simple story with a great many curious overtones. One was that people don’t do what they should even though they are professionally religious people. Another overtone is that the good person who did what he ought to do was an official member of the other side of the iron curtain—the iron curtain that was drawn between the Jews and the Samaritans. It was a man who was on the wrong side of political matters that illustrated proper behavior according to Jesus—and, according to the man he asked! For instead of answering the man’s question, this was another case of skillfully turning the question on the inquirer. He said: “Which of these three men do you think proved neighbor?” Of course the Jew he was talking to didn’t want to say: “The Samaritan.” He said: “The man who was kind to him.” He didn’t say the priest or the Levite, but he did say the man who was kind to him. This story that is so familiar points out quite clearly that Jesus is much more concerned in the positive doing of good than in the prevention of evil!

I have often wondered how this story would have gone on if it had happened in the modern world. Someone would turn in an alarm. They would send a machine gun and police to capture the robbers and in the course of time someone would think about the wounded man. The main thing would be to stop the evildoer—but not with Jesus!

I have also wondered what would happen when the Samaritan got home and someone said to him: “We have heard what you did when you were away from home on the Jerusalem-Jericho Road. Do you think that was the right way for a Samaritan to act?” They would probably turn him over to the un-Samaritan activities committee. Again you see how much more concerned on both sides—both the Jewish and the Samaritan sides—they all were to get the person who didn’t do right, than to do right themselves.

What Jesus was interested in was not so much stopping the robbers as increasing the number of good Samaritans. That is a positive conviction, a central emphasis in the ethical teachings of Jesus.

I could mention others. One thing is very conspicuous. Perhaps it comes out of this story too. How often in the Gospels Jesus selects for rebuke the people that have the most, and selects for praise the people that have the least!

There is a Pharisee who is a fine, professedly religious man and then there is a poor publican, generally despised. Both appear in the temple to pray, and how does it come out? The Pharisee is very conceited about himself. The publican is very guilty and penitent about himself and asks for God's forgiveness. Jesus says: "Which was most justified?" In other words, Jesus seems very sensitive to "proportionate duty." Each of us—in his own place, with his own prejudices and attitudes—has proportionately more responsibility the more privileged he is. Each of us that is privileged has proportionately that much more responsibility for ethical conduct. It is not uniform. Each has to do the same thing but some of us—most of us—have a responsibility for doing more than the average. This is all pretty well summarized in the phrase of the Gospels: "To whom much is committed, will much be required!" We are all unhappily familiar with the income tax system by which taxes are assessed in proportion to something else. In the realm of ethics there is also a proportion of duty and it isn't enough for me to say I am doing as well as so and so, and I know lots of people who aren't any better than I am. That is not enough! I know lots of nations that won't behave any better than we would. That is not enough! The question is: Do we with our privileges recognize the greater responsibility which is ours?

Now I want to speak about a somewhat different angle of this subject. You have had some illustrations of how we can take the Gospels and pick out some of the emphasis of Jesus, but I can never think of this topic without asking how Jesus had the courage to try to tell people what they ought to do!

What authority had Jesus in doing this? When a person came to him, on what did Jesus count? On what did he count when he told people what they ought to do? The name for this is authority. In his own time, as now, people are still asking that question: "What authority do you have to do these things? By what authority do you, Jesus, do these things?" If we are to be his followers at all, we want to recognize where that authority came from, if he had it, and what sort of authority it was.

Many people today are looking for the seat of authority in the wrong place, and it is not an easy question to answer. How far was Jesus himself able to think the question through? Jesus spoke with assurance. He seemed to take for granted that when a question was asked he had something to say in answer to it that was worth mentioning.

For one thing, Jesus didn't lay great stress upon himself. His teaching is very impersonal. He did not say: "I don't care what you think, because I know, and you have to take it from me!" That doesn't sound like Jesus. He does occasionally say: "Verily I say unto you!" But I don't think

that the accent is on the word “I”. I don’t think he goes around asserting himself or calling attention to himself when he uses that phrase. He says: “Now, there are some people who think this is the right thing to do, but let me suggest this other course of action.” When he says “verily I say unto you” he is calling attention not to himself. That “I” is not an emphatic word in the Greek. He is saying: “Look at this point of view.”

I think what he does is this. As a mature, ethical person, he had come to opinions or to insights in the moral realm which he believed were true. I think he had learned, in the words of one of the New Testament writers, “from what he had experienced” (Hebrews 5:8), and it is out of that maturity which wasn’t inherent in him as a special person that he had learned¹. The truth is nothing of which he has a monopoly or that comes to him from a special source.

Like all people of his time he believed that what was true was also the will of God. It is a good deal like the Old Testament prophets. Whatever people thought deeply regarding a situation or the problems of the nation in which they lived, they would regard as law. In other words, the ideal came first and the identification with the will of God was taken for granted rather than the other way around. It was the will of God because it seemed to Jesus transparently clear and true.

This is the real answer. If a thing is true, Jesus as a good Jew and a devout one instinctively identifies it as the will of God. Therefore, it was not on his own authority, or because he was a peculiar medium for the will of God, but because he was anxious for man to see and to know what seemed to be the will of God.

Ultimately, he didn’t depend upon his own authority, or upon his miracles, or upon any supernatural item, but simply upon the truth of what he was saying. The basis of his authority was precisely this self-evident truth.

When we read his words today, we can easily get rid of them even though we profess to be Christian. We find it very easy to ignore what Jesus said. There are many ways in which people slide out from under what Jesus said. But, if what he says wins our assent, it does so because of the intrinsic character of the teaching and our willing assent to it.

There is a passage I love to remember in the Gospels where Jesus says after he argues with some of the people: “Why don’t you judge for yourselves what is right?” The trouble with most of us is that we don’t hear, or don’t know what is right. We don’t accept it. Again and again in the Gospels you have Jesus saying that these people don’t recognize what they are doing, or what they ought to do. In the end, this teaching of Jesus about human conduct about these very simple personal questions which we have to face, rests not upon his say-so, but upon his ability to place a matter in a clear light. His ability was to have people look at a particular point of view and see whether in their own heart they didn’t respond to that comment, and perhaps live by it.

¹ The quoted portion paraphrases the cited verse which reads: “Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered;” RSV or “Son though he was, he learned obedience in the school of suffering;” New English Bible.

It is a skillful way of teaching. Jesus was a skillful teacher! For example, when he told the lawyer who interviewed him about the person who fell among thieves, he had that man cold. That man wanted to escape. When Jesus had told his story, and that man had agreed, and had to agree, that the answer to the problem of being a neighbor was expressed in the behavior of the Samaritan, then all Jesus had to do was to say: “You do the same. Go thou and do likewise!”

This then is the central emphasis of Jesus, the challenge that each one of us in our generation should have our hearts open and our ears ready to hear the kind of advice which historically, through the records of Jesus, seems characteristic of him.

Through his speaking there comes to each of us today the suggestions—not the compulsions, but the challenges for us in the spirit—which say: “Now what do you really think? Do you not think that this represents the highest ideal? Can you be happy if you do anything less than that? If you assent, then go ahead and do it!”

This PDF is Copyright 2010, The Shrewsbury and Manasquan Monthly Meetings of the Religious Society of Friends (Quaker). Views expressed by the author may not be held by either Meeting.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 United States License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/us/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.