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How to Read the Gospels

Leo Tolstoy

1896

There is so much that is strange, improbable, unintelligible, and even contradictory in what professes to be Christ's teaching that people do not know how to understand it.

It is very differently understood by different people. Some say redemption is the all-important matter. Others say the all-important thing is grace, obtainable through the sacraments. Others, again, say that submission to the Church is what is really essential. But the Churches themselves disagree, and interpret the teaching variously. The Roman Catholic Church holds that the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father and the Son; that the Pope is infallible, and that salvation is obtainable chiefly through works. The Lutheran Church does not accept this, and considers that faith is what is chiefly needed for salvation. The Orthodox Russo-Greek Church considers that the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father only, and that both works and faith are necessary to salvation.

And the Anglican and other Episcopalian, the Presbyterian, the Methodist, not to mention hundreds of other Churches, interpret Christ's teaching each in its own way.

Young men, and men of the people, doubting the truth of the Church-teaching in which they have been brought up, of-

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ten come to me and ask what *my* teaching is, and how *I* understand Christ's teaching? Such questions always grieve, and even shock me.

Christ, who the Churches say was God, came on earth to reveal divine truth to men, for their guidance in life. A man—even a plain, stupid man—if he wants to give people guidance of importance to them, will manage to impart it so that they can make out what he means. And is it possible that God, having come on earth especially to save people, was not able to say what He wanted to say clearly enough to prevent people from misinterpreting His words, and from disagreeing with one another about them?

This could not be so if Christ were God; nor even if Christ were not God, but merely a great teacher, is it possible that He failed to express Himself clearly. For a great teacher is great, just because he is able to express the truth so that it can neither be hidden nor obscured, but is as plain as daylight.

In either case, therefore, the Gospels which transmit Christ's teaching must contain truth. And, indeed, the truth is there for all who will read the Gospels with a sincere wish to know the truth, without prejudice, and, above all, without supposing that the Gospels contain some special sort of wisdom beyond human reason.

That is how I read the Gospels, and I found in them truth plain enough for little children to understand, as, indeed, the Gospels themselves say. So that when I am asked what *my* teaching consists in, and how *I* understand Christ's teaching, I reply: I have no teaching, but I understand Christ's teaching as it is explained in the Gospels. If I have written books about Christ's teaching, I have done so only to show the falseness of the interpretations given by the commentators on the Gospels.

To understand Christ's real teaching the chief thing is not to interpret the Gospels, but to understand them as they are written. And, therefore, to the question how Christ's teaching should be understood, I reply: If you wish to understand it, read

the Gospels. Read them putting aside all foregone conclusions; read with the sole desire to understand what is said there. But just because the Gospels are holy books, read them considerately, reasonably, and with discernment, and not at haphazard or mechanically, as if all the words were of equal weight.

To understand any book one must choose out the parts that are quite clear, dividing them from what is obscure or confused. And from what is clear we must form our idea of the drift and spirit of the whole work. Then, on the basis of what we have understood, we may proceed to make out what is confused or not quite intelligible. That is how we read all kinds of books. And it is particularly necessary thus to read the Gospels, which have passed through such a multiplicity of compilations, translations, and transcriptions, and were composed, eighteen centuries ago, by men who were not highly educated, and were superstitious.¹

Therefore, in order to understand the Gospels, we must first of all separate what is quite simple and intelligible from what is confused and unintelligible, and afterwards read this clear and intelligible part several times over, trying fully to assimilate it. Then, helped by the comprehension of the general meaning, we can try to explain to ourselves the drift of the parts which seemed involved and obscure. That was how I read the Gospels, and the meaning of Christ's teachings became so clear to me that it was impossible to have any doubts about it. And I ad-

¹ The Gospels, as is known to all who have studied their origin, far from being infallible expressions of divine truth, are the work of innumerable minds and hands, and are full of errors. Therefore the Gospels can in no case be taken as a production of the Holy Ghost, as Churchmen assert. Were that so, God would have revealed the Gospel as he is said to have revealed the commandments on Mount Sinai; or he would have transmitted the complete book to men, as the Mormons declare was the case with their holy scriptures. But we know how these works were written and collected, and how they were corrected and translated; and therefore not only can we not accept them as infallible revelations, but we must, if we respect truth, correct errors that we find in them.— Author's Note.

vise every one who wishes to understand the true meaning of Christ's teaching to follow the same plan.

Let each man when reading the Gospels select all that seems to him quite plain, clear, and comprehensible, and let him score it on the margin, say with a blue pencil, and then, taking the marked passages first, let him separate Christ's words from those of the Evangelists by marking Christ's words a second time with, say, a red pencil. Then let him read over these doubly scored passages several times. Only after he has thoroughly assimilated these, let him again read the other words attributed to Christ, which he did not understand when he first read them, and let him score, in red, those that have become plain to him. Let him leave unscored such words of Christ as remain quite unintelligible, and also unintelligible words by the writers of the Gospels. The passages marked in red will supply the reader with the essence of Christ's teaching. They will give what all men need, and what Christ therefore said, in a way which all can understand. The places marked only in blue will give what the authors of the Gospels said that is intelligible.

Very likely in selecting what is, from what is not, fully comprehensible, people will not all mark the same passages. What is comprehensible to me may seem obscure to another. But all will certainly agree in what is most important, and there are things which will be found quite intelligible to every one.

It is just this—just what is fully comprehensible to all men—that constitutes the essence of Christ's teaching.²

² This little article—advising men how to read the Gospels most profitably—is, of course, not allowed to be published in Russia. Hectographed and photographed copies do, however, circulate from hand to hand.—Tr.