

# The Word of God Through a Dressing Gown

## RELIGION WITH DASH AND COURAGE

By Rev. John McConnachie, D.D.

*He that Cometh* by Geoffrey Allen, Fellow and Chaplain of Lincoln College, Oxford, is described as a volume of essays on "The Message of Jesus, and present-day Religion." It is the first book which has come out of the Oxford Group Movement, written by a trained theologian, and it has, I admit, made on me a deep impression. So far I have stood outside this movement as an interested and sympathetic onlooker, liking many things in it, disliking others, but not feeling led to associate myself with it. Some of Buchman's methods in dealing with sick souls have not appealed to me, although I recognise that he is not a Lutheran for nothing. He has a deep grasp of Reformed teaching, with the peculiar note of *hilaritas*, which made Luther exclaim, "Do you ask me what is the Gospel? I will tell you. It is nothing other than laughter and mirth"—a note which he has imparted to the movement. Then I confess that Russell's "For Sinners Only" did not get me. In reading it, I could not shake off the impression, no doubt unjustifiable, that it was a "write-up" by a brilliant journalist.

### The New Baptism

But this book of Allen's has caught me. It is a radiantly honest, sincere, and deeply moving book, which will clear away many clouds and criticisms which have been appearing in the *Scots Observer*. We already know Mr Allen as the author of *Tell John*, in which he showed that he stood deeply under the influence of the theology of Karl Barth, to whom, generally, the Oxford Group looks as their theologian. While it was widely read many of us felt that there was something lacking in *Tell John*. In this book, which is a sequel, Mr Allen tells us what the lack was. At the time when he wrote it, he knew only the baptism of John, the baptism of water, unto repentance. Life had "been stripped bare of the false satisfaction of pious pretence," and he wrote in an attitude of "penitent expectancy." Since that time, he has come in contact with leaders of the Oxford Group Movement, through whom he has been "led out of a lonely individualism into a deep fellowship," and has received baptism of the Holy Spirit, and now knows the joy of the fully surrendered life.

So he has written this sequel, which is, in the first place, a frank, personal document, with all the interest, and claiming power of such a book. Its recurring note is, "we speak that we have seen." He shows that it was only after he made the full surrender that the New Testament became for him a lighted book. We cannot enter the Kingdom "head first," as he says. But he that doeth the will shall know.

### The Need of the Church

But, in the second place, the book is a clear exposition, still on Barthian lines, of the main teaching of the Group, dealing with the new birth, the stewardship of life, the call for surrender and obedience, the necessity of waiting on God. He is particularly illuminating on the two questions round which the criticism of the Oxford Group centres of Guidance, and Sharing. His treatment of sin is penetrating. Likewise his doctrine of God, and of the Word of God, as the Sword of Love. He rejects, with Barth, the God of modern theology, as "an amiable figure who is not allowed to rebuke sin, and cannot heal it," and he does not shrink from speaking of God's anger. He closes with a fine

chapter on the Church, and of what it may become, "once the Church acknowledges her failure, and her need of rebirth."

The very distress of our time, he says, is leading to a new season of awakening, and in the out-pouring of the Spirit of life-changing love in the Oxford Group Movement, he sees an evident sign that we are in the early years of one of the big periods of awakening.

If some of the critics will read this book they will see that their criticisms of the Movement are completely beside the mark. It is none of the things which they fear, but a re-emergence of New Testament Christianity in our time, in which surrender to Christ as Lord, and to the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit, are the central truths. A new out-pouring of the Spirit of God is being witnessed. The experience of "sharing" is a genuine re-birth of the New Testament Fellowship, or *Koinonia*, in which the old radiant happiness, and the same impulse to "togetherness" are being witnessed, even to the sharing of possessions, in the spontaneity of fellowship. The miracle of the new birth is again being seen among those whom one would have counted the least susceptible; "the up-and-outs." So far from this movement having any connection with Spiritism, as one writer suggests, it is the very negation of Spiritism. Spiritism is dope. It is not Christian. The Oxford Group condemns every narcotic religion which drugs, instead of cures a sick soul. "Christ regarded narcotic religion as more evil than adultery," says Mr Allen.

### The Method of the Spirit

There is something knightly, and winning about this Oxford Group Movement. It has dash and courage. Its followers are willing to be fools for Christ's sake. It does not shrink even from the jeer of ridicule. Mr Allen tells us that the decisive moment in his deeper experience was a voice which came to him clearly one morning bidding him buy a new dressing-gown as an aid to early rising, for a longer time of morning quiet. It takes courage to tell that.

The movement is on right lines. The Christian Church began as a group, and every new movement within it, the Franciscan, the Wesleyan, began similarly. The Group is in line with the method of the Spirit in all ages. Again, the Church moves ever forward, as Dr Rainy taught us, by revivals, never by evolution. The eschatological cycle of sin, crisis, judgment, and new beginning, is always again repeated.

Where there is life there is danger, and this movement has its dangers, especially in regard to its doctrine of "sharing," and open confession of sin, which call for some serious thinking on the part of the leaders. But if this vital movement, which among others has carried the Barthian theologian, Emil Brunner into it, maintains an awareness to the dangers which are latent in such a movement, it may be charged with great divine blessing for our time.

In the spirit of the Movement, and as a mark of gratitude, Mr Allen has gifted the usual author's royalties to the Movement's work of Christian Evangelism.

"*He that Cometh*." By Geoffrey Allen, Fellow and Chaplain of Lincoln College, Oxford. Alexander Maclehose & Co.: 5s. net.