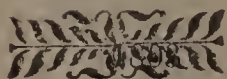


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BY

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BOSTON INVESTIGATOR CO.

1903

JC 178
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JESUS AND PAINE.

MR. CHAIRMAN, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

We are met here to-day to honor the life and services of Thomas Paine. We could not be in better business, if we tried.

A month ago, over all the earth where the spires of Christianity pierce the sky, Christians gathered together to celebrate the birth of a person whom they cannot prove was ever born. Christians could be in better business without half trying.

We have to assume that Jesus lived. We *know* that Paine lived.

The name of Jesus belongs to an age when men were deified; when the divine was not as high as the human is now.

The name of Jesus has influenced the world far more than have his deeds. I hold that his name does not belong to our civilization. Civilization does not depend upon gods, but upon men. Human brains have discovered every path of progress, and human hands have erected every monument of achievement. Men have done everything for gods; gods have done nothing for men. Men have not only supported their gods; they have made them. It is far truer to say that man made the first god from the dust of the ground than to say that God made the first man in this way.

Jesus is a myth, who has been accepted by some as a god

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and by others as a man. I have read somewhat about divinities, but I know nothing about them. The biography of Jesus, as we have it in the New Testament, shows that it is a wise "divine child" that knows its own father.

If Jesus lived on earth and was not a man, then I cannot guess what he was.

I shall deal with the character of Jesus as painted by the gospel-writers, but most of it to me is paint.

I wish to say right here that I do not believe that such a person as the Jesus of the four gospels ever existed. It is against him the way he came into the world. A miracle was added to his birth before he went to sleep in his mother's arms. It is singular that ghosts can be fathers and not mothers.

Then I do not like the accounts of marvelous things which he is said to have done. Miracles are always dead and buried. No one living ever saw a live one. Like angels, we hear of them but we never see them. No hand ever touched the white lilies of death and turned them to the red roses of life.

Neither do I believe that Nature displayed any particular emotion when Jesus died. The earth does not shake with grief, the rocks do not rend themselves with sobs, nor do graves open their doors when gods die. When Jupiter fell from his heavenly throne Olympus did not so much as heave a sigh. When Serapis was beheaded by a Christian battle-axe the mighty pyramids did not topple over, nor the Sphinx cry aloud. Nor did the earth give any sign that it knew when the heart of Jesus ceased to beat. Thousands of gods have died and not a cloud of heaven has shed tears of sorrow upon the ground.

Let the truth be told! No man ever saw a god die and no man saw such phenomena of grief as reported in the New Testament when the son of Mary "gave up the ghost".

Sacred histories sometimes contain sacred falsehoods, but science cannot kneel to superstition. If Jesus lived, and if his

Mr. Jonathan G. Bledsoe
July 22 1925

life went out on the cross, it went out with no more notice from the earth than when a bird's song dies in the air.

Nothing has polluted the intellectual and moral atmosphere more than the pictured cross and its ghastly burden. It has served only to illustrate the cruelty of the past. Let us rather have emblems of joy in our homes. Happiness here makes salvation unnecessary for the hereafter.

When men die for their brother-men, as did rugged old John Brown, at Harper's Ferry, they glorify their deeds, not the gallows upon which they expire. And when they meet death like Socrates, who tried to destroy the gods that he might save men, they add a new lustre to heroism, not to the poison they drink.

The path to the cross is not clear to my mind. I see no logical connection between a pair of innocent idiots eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden and the Son of God dying on a tree in Golgotha four thousand years afterwards. But I am not going to undertake to solve that old theological puzzle. It is too much like playing "cat's cradle". The cross is not a mental or a moral guide-post. It stands for nothing and points nowhere.

I have said that Jesus was a god to some, a man to others and a myth to me. If Jesus was a sublime peasant of Galilee, a mighty reformer among his people, a large and tender-hearted lover of his race, who could grandly give the wealth of his life, and, if need be, the red river of his veins to save the world, then I blame the writers of the gospels for not saying so. I honor every human being who has reached out a hand to a fellow-traveler on the road of life, or who has put a lamp in his window for the stumbling feet of men, and I say now, if a man lived in Palestine two thousand years ago, great enough and good enough to work and die for humankind, that man has my respect and my reverence.

But I have no respect for the mythological creature of the gospels. I do not know whether a god who goes about on man's legs can walk on the sea as well as on the land; whether he can add the blush of wine to the pallid face of water; whether he can drive disease away with a word or a touch and prove death to be a lie; whether he can cheat earth of his body and be received up into heaven, but I *do* know that a man cannot do such things.

I believe that man is the biggest thing and the best thing that ever walked over this old earth. I believe that everything that has been told about gods and what gods have done in this world has been told to seal the stock in some pious corporation.

If Jesus was a man, we have got to rub out almost all of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. If Jesus was a man, Christianity is a fraud.

What was Jesus, in the light of reason, in the light of common sense, in the light of science and in the light of facts?

He was not the son of God. He was not the son of the Holy Ghost. He was not the son of David. He was not the Messiah, the Christ. He was not the King of the Jews. He was not the savior of mankind. He was not divine. He was not the Master of men. He was not what he has been cracked up to be.

What did Jesus do, in the light of reason, in the light of common sense, in the light of science and in the light of facts?

He did not see "the spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting upon him." He did not hear "a voice from heaven, saying: This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." He did not fight that disputatious duel in the wilderness with the devil. He did not heal a leper. He did not drive fever from Peter's wife's mother by touching her hand. He did not scare devils out of men and women. He did not make the blind see nor the dumb talk. He did not walk on

water, unless it was frozen. He did not feed twelve thousand people on nothing and have something left. He did not raise Lazarus from the grave after he had been dead four days. He did not change water into wine. He did not go up into heaven with his flesh and bones on. He did not do one single miracle.

That is what Jesus did *not* do. What he *did* do is hard to tell. He did n't do much. He did n't, really.

Take away from the gospel-story all that is mythical and miraculous, that is, all that is false, and you could not build a Christian church a foot high on what is left. Any institution that stands upon myths and miracles is not in harmony with the genius of this age and is no help to an honest mind.

Even though Jesus wrought the wonders related in the gospels, not one of them is worth two cents to the men and women of this age. They are merely wax-figure performances. You could not get them patented. The miracle of the loaves and fishes does not feed the starving millions of to-day. The miracle at the marriage in Cana does not put a bottle of wine in the hands of the sick and feeble. The miracle of walking on the sea does not help our brave sailors when their ship goes down. The miracles of healing have not driven a disease from earth. The miracle of restoring Lazarus to life has not kept death away from our doors. Nor did the miracle of ascending bodily into heaven give to others the power to "go and do likewise".

If Jesus was possessed of divine power why did he not do something practical, something useful, something that would help the world? Why did he not give to man the telescope, the microscope, the sewing-machine, the reaper and binder, the printing-press, the telegraph and the telephone, the power loom, the cotton-gin, ether or chloroform, something that would increase human knowledge, something that would save the backs of the toilers, the tired eyes and worn fingers of mothers,

something that would banish suffering and agony, something that would sweeten life and give more music to the dull air?

He saw men wanting everything and he gave them nothing; saw them poor, lowly and unfortunate and he never told them how to better their condition; saw them naked and told them that God would clothe them; saw them hungry and told them that God would feed them; saw them cold and said that God would make it hot for them; heard them crying for bread and he pronounced beatitudes upon them.

Jesus out of all his miraculous wealth did not give to the world a brass pin, a cut nail, a lucifer match, an agate button, a glass bottle, a lead pencil, a fish hook, a jackknife, or a pair of spectacles. Take those few things out of human life to-day and back to the "chaos and old night" of barbarism would man go in one minute, and yet Jesus did not seem to know the importance of one of those things.

Jesus had twelve apostles, twelve men whom he selected to carry out his mission to mankind. When he sent them forth into the world what do you suppose he told them to do? To show the people how to make window-glass, how to do sanitary plumbing, how to saw logs into shingles and clapboards, how to make a cook-stove, how to distil illuminating gas, how to make a leather shoe, how to construct a clock, how to make a plow, how to build a ship, how to manufacture paper, or how to make soap? Not a bit of it. Jesus told his apostles to go, "preach that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils." That was his charge. The apostles were to be preachers, doctors and — impostors. The kingdom of heaven which was "at hand" two thousand years ago has not shown up yet; the dead have never been brought back to life; leprosy is still an incurable disease; and devils have never been found by the surgeon's skill in human bodies.

The only sane thing that Jesus charged his apostles to do was to heal the sick, but not one of them immortalized his name as a physician by his remarkable cures.

We live in a magnificent age; in an age of wondrous inventions, of glorious achievements; in an age when science stands triumphant upon prostrate superstition; in an age of emancipated mind, of intellectual light and moral warmth; in an age when humanity's heart is touched by humanity's wants; in an age when the welfare of man is the highest concern of human government.

What did Jesus contribute toward the glories of this age? Had men obeyed his voice they would still be standing with folded hands and praying lips. The fertile brain of man and not any father in heaven sowed all the seeds of progress and civilization.

Jesus never said a word that would put a star on our flag; never said a word out of which could come the Declaration of Independence; never uttered a sentence from which could grow the public school, the public library, or the public platform. Jesus did not work for his fellow-man, but for his Father in heaven. He told men to seek the kingdom of God, not the republic of man. That kind of talk never would have pushed this world ahead half an inch politically, socially or morally. Jesus and his Father in heaven together did not do what Thomas Paine did for human freedom, for human enlightenment, for human happiness.

A great many people think that we have no right to speak of Jesus as if he were a man; no right to criticize his words or deeds as reported in the Bible. They say that it is irreverent to do so. I want to say that I have no reverence for myths, for impossible beings, for falsehoods or frauds; no reverence for priests and their impositions, but I have reverence for right,

for justice, for truth, for anything and everything that consults man's interest and man's well-being.

It may shock the miseducated ears of some Christians to hear the names of Jesus and Paine coupled together, but I think that I can show that Jesus has been in worse company. People who worship Jesus think they do no wrong in slandering Thomas Paine. It is irreverent to my mind to lie about a great and good man; far more than to tell the truth or to give an honest piece of one's mind about a Holy Ghost.

Too many people reverence what is called "holy" without inquiring whether it is good for anything. Now, my test of goodness is usefulness, and I apply it to things religious as well as to things secular. Does it help man in this life? That is the question. If a thing does not help man here then it is no good. I do not want to buy stock in gold mines in another world and pay for them in the gold of this world. The holy things of the Church are of no practical value. You could not sell them on a bargain counter. Not a thing that Jesus did is put into practice by man to-day — except praying, and that is putting a pump into a dry well. Real things are holier than "holy" things. A good home is worth a dozen heavens. What is beneficial to man is more sacred than what priests and ministers have mumbled a lot of pious nonsense over. If only those things are holy which have been consecrated by a priest, I prefer to take mine profane.

I honor all the sensible teachings of Jesus, and would not rob him of one leaf of the laurel of fame which honestly crowns his dead brow, but I must let my lips speak the truth, and say, that, grand as are some of the moral precepts in the "Sermon on the Mount" it would have been impossible for Abraham Lincoln to have found his Emancipation Proclamation in its words. The slave had to wait nineteen hundred years after Jesus died before there was enough love of man in the breast

of a nation on this earth to strike the shackles from his limbs; and, more than this, the followers of Jesus called those who advocated the abolition of slavery—infidels.

The pathway to liberty from the first morning of the first year of the first Christian century has been blocked by men who upheld tyranny in the name of God. Aye, and through all those long centuries was the struggle for human liberty resisted by those ordained to do the divine will, and the sword of the Church which was drawn to defend God was plunged into the hearts of the noblest lovers of men. But, in the language of Byron:

“They never fail who die
In a great cause; the block may soak their gore;
Their heads may sadden in the sun; their limbs
Be strung to city gates and castle walls—
But still their spirit walks abroad. Tho’ years
E lapse, and others share as dark a doom,
They but augment the deep and sweeping thoughts
Which overpower all others, and conduct
The world at last to freedom.”

The gospel-writers put some glorious sentences into the mouth of Jesus, but, when all is said and done, the supreme test is this: Do they make human life happier and living easier? Take all the beatitudes of Jesus, take his great sermon and add in the “Golden Rule”, and, all together they do not measure up for the working man or woman against three square meals a day, a good suit of clothes and a ton of coal. I would not give much for a fruit tree that never bore anything but blossoms.

No angel whispered a lie into the ear of the mother of Thomas Paine. He came into the world with two human parents. No miraculous light shone over his cradle, and no heavenly choir sang songs of praise when he was born. No wise men came from China or India to Thetford looking for his advent and no star of heaven stood sentinel over his birthplace.

Paine was just an ordinary baby, who grew into an ordinary child and developed into an extraordinary man. What makes one person a genius and another person a fool no one can say. Heredity accounts for something, environment for something, but nothing that we know accounts for the rest.

Paine's life up to the time he came to America is not important to us to-day. What prepared him for the great part he was to play in the revolutionary drama which was enacted on this continent a century and a quarter ago it is impossible to know. If ever liberty walked the earth in flesh and blood, surely it was in the form of Thomas Paine. He came to our shores like destiny.

The American colonies, while resisting oppression, declared loyalty to their king. Then followed the Nineteenth of April and quickly afterwards the Seventeenth of June. From that hour rebellion was a fact and a new nation a prophecy.

One of the first to see that separation from Great Britain was inevitable was Thomas Paine, although he had been but a few months in the country. With the eye of genius he saw the colonies free and independent States, and in the fall of 1775, with the "shot heard round the world" ringing in his ears, he sat down to write the pamphlet from whose inspiration came a new nation, unblessed by priests and cursed by kings. Paine boldly declared that all men are created equal; that no person is the ruler of another and that every one has the same right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. He had witnessed the evils of monarchy, the tyrannies of nobility, and he asserted with Tennyson: "'Tis only noble to be good."

Paine saw the wrongs in the world and he bravely assailed them—although he had to do it alone. He denounced African slavery in America when the Christian pulpit defended it as a divine institution. He demanded justice for woman when the

whole of Christendom robbed her of every jewel of her nature. He asked men to show kindness to animals when Christians were unkind to their fellow-men. He could not be indifferent to human wrongs wherever they existed, and they existed wherever there was a priest or a king.

Jesus said: "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth. I came not to send peace, but a sword."

Paine said: "I would gladly agree with all the world to lay aside the use of arms and settle matters by negotiations." One of our foremost senators recently said: "The most hopeful moral force in the world to-day is arbitration. Every moral and educational force in the country should be directed to a universal acceptance of arbitration." Thomas Paine was the first to advocate international arbitration to settle disputes, and not Jesus; in fact, Jesus never considered a national question, never had an idea of political liberty, never comprehended the meaning or the glory of human independence.

Jesus said: "I am come to set a man at variance against his father and the daughter against her mother."

Paine said: "If this earth is ever to be covered with human happiness it will be by parents treating their children with affection and children treating their parents with respect."

Upon whose words could a happy world best be built, upon those of Jesus, or upon those of Paine?

Paine came to abolish the evils, the wrongs, the superstitions which Jesus upheld and helped to perpetuate. Jesus said: "Render unto Cæsar the things which are Cæsar's, and unto God the things which are God's." For eighteen hundred years the world was divided by Cæsar and God, that is, by the king and the priest. Then came Thomas Paine and in thunder tones cried: **RENDER UNTO MAN THE THINGS WHICH ARE MAN'S'**

Those words announced the downfall of the crown and the crozier, of the imposition of divine government for mankind.

Between the throne and the altar man had been crushed, robbed and betrayed. The king owned the body and the priest owned the soul, and what one did not steal from his victim the other did. Millions of slaves toiled to support one despot, and accepted their slavery upon the word of the priest as a condition imposed by divine love. But, with the words of Paine retribution began and justice became a hope in the hearts of men.

The three mightiest contributions to political and religious freedom which mankind had known came from the brain of Thomas Paine. What he wrote changed the whole civilized world. He helped to establish a republic in America, to secure man his rights in England and to revolutionize France.

He accomplished the Herculean task of making men think, and upon that most important of all subjects—themselves.

Paine saw that superstition sucked the blood of sense from the brain as the thirsty mouths of the air drink the water from the soil and that there could be no true liberty where there was priestcraft.

Jesus said to his disciples: "Preach the gospel to every creature:" "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be damned." Paine said to the world: "To do good is my religion," and he practiced what he preached. Jesus prayed to his "Father in heaven" and got no answers to his prayers. Paine worked for man and saw the glories of religious and political freedom as the result of his labors.

Thomas Paine spoke the greatest words of the eighteenth century. He did more for human liberty than any man who had lived before him. If he did not start the ball of revolution rolling in America, he kept it rolling after it was started.

In writing anything he asked himself only two questions: Is it right? Is it true? That was enough for Paine. He did

not ask the Christian question: Will it pay? Thomas Paine stood upon right and truth, and he believed that the world should stand upon them too, and he did all he could to make it do so.

What he did, he did for the people. He was man's friend and he knew man's enemies. He never sold his voice or pen. What he said, he said straight from his heart. No man ever wrote more earnestly and no man was ever read more eagerly.

The highest monument of injustice on this earth is America's ingratitude to Thomas Paine. This monument has been built by Christian malice out of Christian falsehoods. I shall be satisfied if I can take one stone from this monument.

