

*“He that is not with me is against me;
and he that gathereth not with me scattereth.”
Luke 11:23.*

FOR OR AGAINST CHRIST
A Sermon by Theodor Zahn

A WEEK without a Sunday, and work without rest or holidays, would indeed be slavery. Sunday has, therefore, been rightly extolled as the protector of liberty, especially for those who earn their living by manual labour. We who are living in a University, that we may teach and learn, find a like blessing in the beneficial interchange of public work and work in common and rest at home, into which our years are divided, and the coming and going, by which to a certain extent our circle is broken up, only that it may be reunited after the lapse of a few months. We must not merely enjoy this privilege, we must also profit by it in good earnest. Though we may sometimes feel sad because some are leaving us never to return,—I do not know whether this applies to any amongst us to-day,—yet, on the whole, these changes are constantly introducing fresh life amongst us, and they secure our freedom from the indolent and deadening habits to which even mental work may fall a prey. In order that we may be preserved from this, and be really able to begin anew, wherever it is the will of God that we should continue our lives, and take up our work again, we must make good use of the time given us for rest, and examine ourselves and our lives. Where are we? what are we doing? what do we want to do? and what forces us into action? We ought often thus to question ourselves, that our lives, in all their varied multiplicity of thought, may not at last become thoughtless, and, in spite of their activity, may not end in useless and purposeless drifting. Such an examination in the light of the Divine Word is always a solemn matter; it is doubly solemn at this season, when every Sunday we cry to Jesus, the Lamb of God, who, though guiltless, was put to death on the Cross, for His mercy and peace. We must find out our bearings by the Cross which is lifted up before us; and we will not let it out of our sight to-day, though we are going to meditate on a text of Scripture which does not refer to it. A few words from the Gospel for the day shall serve as our text.

“He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth.”—Luke xi. 23.

In these words our Lord asserts a universal rule. He places before all men, in order to try to warn, and to force them to decide, a definite alternative from which there can be no escape. This alternative was set before us long ago; it is always before us, morning, noon, and night; it will resound through all history and all nations, through all communities and all homes, till the question has been answered with Yes or No by all to whom it is addressed.

Jesus requires all men to take His part, and to gather with Him, because He came for all men, and because the work of His life is the one great work of God, to which all human work must be subordinated, and with which it must be united that it may be well pleasing to God. He also enforced His demand, and thus proved His right to speak, as only He who had the right could speak without blasphemous presumption. When He spake these words, He was surrounded by people of all sorts. A sick man was there, the string of whose tongue He had loosed by His word; many were there who wondered and held their peace. Some were there who strove to explain His power of working miracles as a devilish power. Others, to whom this explanation seemed at least premature, required of Him a sign from heaven, as an undeniable proof that He spoke and acted in covenant with God. A woman was there who called the mother blessed who had borne such a son as Jesus. The disciples of Jesus were also present who had long been with Him, and who had already begun to work with Him in gathering together the community of the kingdom of God. But all these followers did not satisfy the Lord; He must be more than a marvellous man, whose wonderful appearance might be explained in

many ways, whose entrancing speech made men marvel, and whose actions none really dared to blame; who was followed by some who trusted in Him as their Guide, whilst others sought for reasons for turning their backs upon Him. Their enmity was still too cold for Him, their friendship too lukewarm. It must be made manifest that none might pass Him by, but that all must take up a definite position with regard to Him; for life and salvation depended upon being on His side.

Even during His work on earth, Jesus forced men to decide either for or against Him. Because He never ceased testifying that the works of men were evil, and that only in Him, and by His mediation, forgiveness of sins, peace of mind, and eternal life were to be found, His opponents, who had been disputing so coldly and deliberately, became His furious enemies. When they had brought Him to the Cross, by straining the law, and misusing their magisterial authority, they imagined that they had been victorious over Him, but even then He showed Himself victorious over His enemies by forcing them to listen, and to decide either for or against Him. Even His friends, whose hearts had already gone out to Him, had still to learn what it meant to be with Jesus, and also for Jesus, in violent opposition to the majority and the leading members of their nation. And when many of His disciples forsook Him, and He asked the Twelve if they would also forsake Him, Peter answered in all sincerity, "Lord, to whom shall we go?" And when Jesus put an end to all the entreaties and warnings of His apostles by the decisive words, "Let us go into Judæa," Thomas said, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him." It is true that an hour came when they all forsook Him; Jesus had to mourn that, even in His last night, the most faithful could not watch and pray with Him for one hour. He must needs at last be left alone, so that it might be made plain for all time that, without stifling His love or bending His faithful obedience, the whole burden of the sin of the world was laid on Him alone. Jesus had no fellow-worker, no companion, save His Heavenly Father, in suffering and in death. And yet He enforced His demand on His disciples. Though some fled and others denied Him, though all doubted, trembled, and mourned, there was never any hesitation on the part of any of them, as to whether they would be for or against Him. With the exception of the son of perdition who betrayed Him, the hearts of all the disciples remained true to Him in the warmest love, and, in spite of all the weakness of the flesh, a willing spirit never failed them. The bitter tears of Peter, which immediately followed his denial, the weeping of Mary Magdalene at the open grave, the burning hearts of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, all prove, as much as the mocking laughter under the Cross and the despair of Judas, that at last it was impossible to stand in the presence of Jesus on debatable ground. He enforced His alternative. He, at whose birth the angels sang "Peace on earth," said also, that He had not come to bring peace, but a sword. He who had come to gather together the scattered children of God, had brought about an incurable division in His own nation; yea, He had set father and son, mother and daughter, against each other. He had formed two parties between whom there would be ever less and less possibility of reconciliation. Worship here, blasphemy there; faith, hope, and love here; hatred, despair, and destruction there: this was the result of His imperative demand that all must decide either for or against Him.

Jesus still makes the same demand. He wills that all should take His side, that not one should be His enemy. And let none of you say that it is unnecessary to bring this demand to remembrance in a Christian community, gathered together to hear His Word. If in this so-called Christian world we could ask all if they were for or against Jesus, and then could count votes, two out of every three would refrain from voting. Some would say they felt no inclination to give a decisive answer to this difficult and complicated question. Others would reply that this question had long ago been answered for every one acquainted with history, and it had therefore been struck off the order of the day. The history of humanity, dating from the birth of Christ, had decided for Christ, and the only way in which any sensible man could oppose Him was by opposing the foolish conclusions and exaggerated judgments of His worshippers. But even this was not such a very urgent task. The enthusiasm of the early Christians, the fanatical and almost idolatrous worship of the irresistible Leader, and the childlike trust in His power as able to control the powers of nature, had been gradually cooled and moderated by the

progress of mental development. It was natural that, while He was on earth, the great Worker of miracles should be the object of the adoring admiration of some, and the deadly hatred of others. Since He has passed away and His supposed miracles have been withdrawn from the critical verdict of man's intellect, there is no longer any question as to the Person of Jesus, but only as to the lasting result of His work, and that is an incitement to a purified religion and an abstract morality for which there is cause for thankfulness. The precepts of the Sermon on the Mount are the kernel of the Gospel; all else is but the shell which has long been broken and cast aside by all sensible persons.

But the Lord will not be set aside by such words. He Himself is the Kernel of this Gospel. It is not the enthusiasm of the ignorant worshippers whom He had already found during His life on earth, and in still greater numbers after His death; it is not the Confession of the Church "nor her dogmas," nor the Christian Services and their superabundant forms, but it is Jesus Himself, the humble Preacher of the Gospel, who requires men to decide either for or against His Person. It does not suffice Him that all other men should follow His example, trusting in God and living and working in the world, as He believed, loved, and worked before them; He knows that no man can do this. He requires all men to be with Him, and to live and work in fellowship with Him. Therefore, till the kingdom of God, which Jesus preached and founded, has become an obvious fact, the question will remain on the order of the day, whether we are for Him and gathering with Him, or whether we are against Him, and hindering and destroying His work with all our might.

There are many other questions which lead men to form themselves into parties, questions which often are only of consequence for a year or two; then they are succeeded by others which are quite as exciting, and men are as ready as ever to take sides. Amongst these questions there are some that are very difficult and complicated, and people who lack every quality which would enable them to give a weighty answer, are expected to give their opinions and record their votes. But the great question which Jesus raised is no longer to be on the order of the day. The division of parties that Jesus caused, the opposition between the friends and companions of Jesus and His enemies and opponents, is no longer to be a question on which men must divide; it is no longer to inflame hearts, and to lay claim to hands and mouths. Do not let us allow ourselves to be led astray by men's idle talk, however loud it may be, nor by their silence, however dignified it may seem. They can no more silence our Lord Christ whom we confess, than they can succeed in ridding the world of the great alternative with reference to His Person. The rent that Jesus made cannot be mended till He comes again and acknowledges His own who have acknowledged Him. While on the surface of life in the world, in the Reichstag and other parliamentary assemblies, in learned and unlearned books and papers, party-fights are being carried on in which Jesus and His Gospel seem to have no part, deep down, beneath it all, there lies the one antagonism, which Jesus created, between the men who take His side that He may be on their side, and those who are against Him, because His fellowship is painful and wearisome to them.

If it had only been a question whether Jesus was a tempter and destroyer, or the benefactor and Saviour of His people, whether His death on the Cross was a shameful defeat or a glorious victory, then indeed it would be no longer necessary for us to take His side, and give Him glory. We should be giving Him nothing thereby that He did not already possess, and we should not be able to change the views of His enemies. Jesus does not indeed require our fellowship for His own sake, but for ours. When He trod the most difficult road, on which all forsook Him, He said to His disciples: "Ye leave Me alone; and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me." In life, as in suffering, He did not think of His own safety and glory, but of the salvation of lost mankind and the restoration of their lost glory. If He found it needful, now and then, to assert that He did not seek His own glory, and desired neither the testimony nor the help of man, it would be superfluous to do so now, for He has long since passed from man's judgment, and is exalted by God over all the power of His enemies. But now, as then, He requires men to take His side, because through Him alone salvation is to be found from the sin which separates them from God, and from death, the wages of sin; and because it is on His side only that men

can endure in the hope of victory in the lifelong mortal combat which is ordained for all men, but which has only been victoriously maintained by the One Man, Jesus Christ. This is not all written down in the few words of our text, but it is taken for granted again and again in other forms, in this as in all the other demands that Jesus makes on the hearers of His preaching. They must be with Him that He may be with them, and He must be with them, and appear before God for them, that they may have God on their side.

Now this demand, that every man must decide for Him and cleave to Him, is intensified by His threatening, that otherwise they will become His enemies, and must be regarded as such by Him. "He that is not with Me is against Me." This threatening does not refer to the pronounced enemies of the Lord, to those who will not give up sin, and therefore are His adversaries, but it refers to men who listen patiently to His Word and yet do not think it worth while to decide for or against Him. They must know that indifference and indecision have already made them His enemies. The enmity which starts up against Jesus in blind anger may be transformed into love and adoration, but cold indifference to the words of salvation preached, and to the well-known Saviour, is a hopeless condition. It was because Jesus' heart was burning with love for His adversaries and for those who had gone astray that He said to the indifferent: "I would thou wert cold or hot: so then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of My mouth."

This is also a solemn warning for us, that we too should examine our position with reference to the Person of our Saviour. A preacher cannot follow the thoughts in all their secret ways, which such words must arouse in the hearts of honest hearers. But our Lord points out a way in our text, to those who wish to examine themselves, a way in which a man may see clearly whether he is for or against Christ in his innermost heart. "He that gathereth not with Me scattereth." Jesus calls His own work gathering. He found many, in His own nation, who had gone astray, and who, in consequence of their apostasy from the law of God, had been cast out of the community, and who yet, in the desires of their hearts, were nearer the kingdom of God than many Pharisees who kept the law of God strictly. The lost sons and daughters of Israel must be sought out and gathered in. There were also true Israelites without guile, who, dissatisfied with their own righteousness and honesty, looked for a Saviour and Comforter of the nation, but they too were scattered like sheep without a shepherd; it was necessary that they should be gathered into a community of the kingdom of God. And the love of Jesus, which sought them out and gathered them in, reached still further. Jesus not only knew, but also said, that there were men outside Israel, amongst the heathen nations, who must be gathered in from the Dispersion, so that, when united with those who had wandered and strayed from Israel, they might become one fold under the one Shepherd Jesus. The Lord did not hesitate to speak of those heathen as sheep of His fold and His already; and the Evangelist even ventured to speak of them, though they were as yet unconverted, as the dispersed children of God, for whom Jesus came and offered up His life, that they might be gathered in. This work of gathering in was not finished with the calling of the Gentiles. Even in the community which was gathered in by the Gospel, many who really could only thrive in union with it, have been separated from it and have wandered away.

We find many in the great Church communities into which Christendom has been divided, who, though outwardly united, do not inwardly belong to one another, while, outside the borders of these communities, a hand might be held out to many who are one in heart with them with reference to the great alternative whether they are for or against Christ. The day will come when all who have decided for Jesus, and have remained true to His banner, will be gathered out of the Dispersion, and will be united both outwardly and inwardly. The object of all the work of Jesus is that there may be one fold under one Shepherd. All must take part in this great work of in-gathering, if they do not wish to hear their sentence from the Lord's mouth, that they have scattered where He gathered.

Let us look at the work of our calling in the light of this judgment of Jesus. Are we gathering for the Lord, or does our work only serve to scatter what He has gathered and intends to gather in? It might seem at first sight as though he only gathered with Jesus, who, like Jesus and His apostles, preached the Gospel, so that erring and scattered souls might be gathered into the one community of the faithful, and be preserved there. But our Lord's words do not let us off so easily, for He looks upon all the men who do not work with Him as the enemies and destroyers of His work. Jesus spake thus to every one; He said the same to the women who were amongst His hearers. All cannot be, and are not meant to be, preachers of the Gospel, but every one who has placed himself by the side of Jesus will find that it is impossible to carry on the work of his calling without any reference to the work of Jesus. The words of the Apostle, "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin," apply to all Christians. We must be patient with others, but severe with ourselves. In this respect also Jesus gave His disciples a helpful example. Once when they complained discontentedly of one who worked in the Name of Jesus without joining himself with the disciples, He spoke words which seem like the very opposite of our text, but which are in reality their necessary complement: "Forbid him not, for he that is not against us is on our part." We must look patiently on the works of others, even though they do not give us the impression that they have decided for Jesus with all their hearts, and therefore so order their work that they may gather with Him. As for ourselves, we must not be content with confessing Him, and then taking up a calling which has nothing to do with Him. We need not be theologians in order to avoid this, neither need we give up any calling which is justifiable in itself and necessary for the maintenance of human society, in order to take part in the great and yet far from completed work of our Lord. Amongst the various kinds of knowledge, whose rediscovery we owe to the Reformation, one of the most fruitful is the knowledge that man can serve God in any human calling, and can work for His kingdom as menservants or maidservants, as scholars or officials, as earthly princes or priests. The kingdom of God, founded by Jesus, exists still as fellowship in faith and prayer, and as such it requires workers—many workers, indeed—whose work is solely and entirely to gather in the community, and to keep it together. But when the kingdom of God is perfected, then there will be nothing wanting in it which, in accordance with the will of God, may be the work of men's hands, and then the fruit of all their labour will be found there as a sweet reward, for all work so done is gathering with Christ. The least service that you can do in love to God and your neighbour, is done in God's service, and is a fellow-working with Jesus, which will not be lost in the kingdom of God. Even if that particular work should vanish, still the love in which it was done would remain. It remains in the man who showed it, and in those who received it. But the most splendid work you can do, and the most fruitful investigations in any branch of learning which you can carry on, if done with no reference to the kingdom of God, and with no desire to serve Christ in His brethren, are forbidden, if you wish to be a Christian, for all comes under the Lord's verdict: "He that gathereth not with Me scattereth."

When we measure the results of our calling by this rule, we shall find that there is much which seems very unchristian, and like dead works. Let us beware of hindering the work of Christ by our actions, by not advancing it amongst His followers and in communion with Him, and then we may take fresh courage and decide for Jesus and His work. If we are really with Him and working for Him, He will also be with us and our work. Amen.