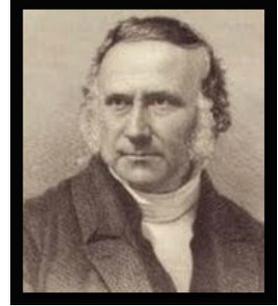


Doctrines and Death



A few years after I was settled in my congregation, a family moved into the place from another section of the country, and took a seat in our church. The husband and wife both brought letters of dismissal from the church where they had lived, and became members of our church. I soon became acquainted with them, and much interested about them. They were little more than thirty years of age, active, wealthy, and of good education, had seen much of the world, were energetic in all that they undertook; and I thought them capable of doing much good. I therefore took the more pains to know them well. They entered very readily into our plans and ways, and their aid was beneficial to us.

But it soon became manifest to me, that the wife was not well satisfied. She did not much complain, or find fault, so far as I know; but many of her expressions, uttered in conversation with myself and others, indicated a dissatisfied mind. Whether this dissatisfaction was personal towards myself, or had reference to the congregation, I could not, at first, even conjecture. She had been educated in her youth, in another denomination, whose forms of worship differed from our own in some degree; and I deemed it probable, that she did not feel quite at home among us. I respected her the more on this account. I did not think it would be wise to let her know, that I perceived her dissatisfaction; but I determined rather to be faithful and friendly to her, and let her dissatisfaction wear off, as I trusted it would. She had never mention it to me, and if I should mention it to her, I thought it quite likely that she

would throw off all restraint, and be confirmed in her unhappy dislike. I therefore, always treated her just as if she were satisfied with me, and with her fellowship in the church.

As time passed on, I became more and more convinced, that her dislike had respect to myself. I aimed to conjecture what it was in me, that did not suit her; but I could form no opinion. She might dislike me, as a man; or she might dislike me, as a minister: I could not tell which. Or her dislike, on either one point, might lead to dislike, on the other. But as she never disclosed her feelings to me, I never disclosed my knowledge of them to her

But after she had remained with us about three years; I supposed that I had discovered clearly the grounds of her dissatisfaction. She did not like some of my preaching; indeed, very little of it suited her. I could at times perceive this, when she was listening to my sermons. And in conversation with her, when she adverted very modestly to my preaching, and expressed her opinion, that some particular sermons were likely to do good, and that she did not believe some others were so appropriate, I perceived, that she disapproved of the greater part of my sermons. She disliked those, which she called “doctrinal.” Such themes as human sinfulness, divine sovereignty, justification by faith in Christ simply, regeneration not by baptism, but by the Holy Spirit aside from baptism, the unbending nature of the law of God, the justice of God in the condemnation of sinners, and the obligation resting upon sinners to repent, especially because God proffers to them the aids of the Holy Spirit—these doctrines did not appear to be acceptable to her. My mind apologized for her dislike, by the fact, that she had been educated in another denomination, and by the recollection of the strength of our early preferences. However, as she had not complained of my preaching, but had only spoken in the way of inquiry and suggestion; all I could do was, first, to refer to the Bible, and show, that in my preaching I had not given to such subjects a greater proportionate regard, than the divine

writers had: and then, to explain to her, how such subjects were the most important and practical of all possible things, because they were the facts in the case, because they addressed men's hearts, and laid the foundation of religion there, in the heart's experience of God's truth, by the power of the Holy Spirit. This explanation appeared to cut her to the heart. But she did not complain.

By many things in her appearance and conversation, I was convinced, after a time, that some change was taking place in her religious views and feelings. The nature of the questions she sometimes put to me, about experimental religion especially, convinced me of this. She had never told me so, however, in any very plain manner; and I did not deem it best to make any inquiries about it. But she became a personal friend to me very evidently, not only as a man, but especially as her minister. And she used to urge upon the attention of her friends, as I learned, the truths which I preached; and used to urge them to "attend the church and listen to every word so as to understand." In this friendship and confidence, her dissatisfaction all gone, she continued to live in the church, manifestly a growing and happy believer, till the day of her death. The very doctrines, which she had disliked, became the delight of her soul; and she often requested me to go to some other places which she named, and preach there the sermons which she had listened to at home; "for," says she, "the people there do not hear these truths, and do not know how precious they are. I did not use to hear them when I was there."

At one time, a friend of hers, a young person, had united with the denomination, to which she formerly belonged. But though this young person stood in such relation to her, that it would naturally have been expected, that such a profession of religion would have been made known to her at the time; yet it was kept a secret from her—she knew nothing of it, till some little time after her young friend had been to the communion. She then ascertained, that her own mother had advised the young person to this step. It grieved her much. She could not think it was right. She

thought, that some stronger evidence of fitness, than her young friend possessed, was requisite for church-membership. In the pain of her heart, she spoke to the old lady about it: “Why, mother!” said she, “How could you advise it? I think it is just the way to deceive souls! You seem to suppose, that baptism and the church ordinances are everything! I thought you had learnt better! That is just the way you brought me up; and if I had not learnt better, I should have been ruined forever! And now, you have just led this young creature astray; and I am afraid she will never find it out, till it is too late!”—This she told me herself with deep affliction and tears; and asked me, if she had said anything disrespectful, or what was wrong in such a case. She said, she wished to “honor her mother, but she could not avoid speaking, when she was so much afraid this poor young creature would be led to ruin!”

When she came to her last illness, I saw her often. Her sufferings were very great, continually. Her patience never forsook her, for a moment. She never uttered a single syllable of complaining—not a murmur escaped her; though her exceeding pain sometimes compelled her to shriek. As I visited her, from time to time, for conversation and prayer, she was accustomed to speak freely to me; and after I had left her, I used to write down some of her expressions, part of which I here transcribe.

About ten days before her death, I found her in the most excruciating agony. She said to me, “I am in great pain. I never knew, what pain was, before. But my God sends it; and I know it is good for me, or he would not bring it upon me, so dreadfully. I do not complain. I sometimes scream, because I cannot help it. But do not think me impatient, because I scream. If I could avoid it, I am sure I would. I am afraid my friends will think me impatient, and think religion is not such a support as I tell them; but it is only my poor body that troubles me. My mind is at peace. Christ sustains me, or I could never endure this. And, as you have often told us in your sermons, that afflictions are benefits to

God's children; I find it so now. Indeed, I can see now, as I look back, that, in all my life, God has given me my richest mercies, in the shape of crosses. Very often, I did not know it, at the time; but I know it now. I praise him for it all. He sustains me. I have dreadful pain, but I have precious peace: My Saviour makes good to me his promises, as you have so often assured us he would. I find now, that it is true. I believe it now, in a way that I never believed it before."

A day or two afterwards she said, "I am glad you have come. I want you to pray with me, and thank the Lord for his goodness. I am in no less pain, but I am supported wonderfully. I find, that I know a great many things about religion now, which I never understood before. You have taught us a great deal about the promises, and living by faith; and now, I know what it means. Faith is everything. It gives me patience. It gives me love; and leads my heart to rest. You have not taught us too much about it nor said too much about Christ. He is all in all to me.

"When I have a little more strength as I hope I shall have, before I die: I want to say something to you about yourself. I cant say much now. If you will come in, another time, when you can; I will say more. I want to tell you something about your preaching. It was a long time, before I could be reconciled to your way. I did not like it. I was blind, and did not understand why you should preach so much about Christ and the atonement, and our evil hearts of unbelief, and the Holy Spirit, and sovereign grace to justify us, and prayer. But I understand it all now. And I find it all true; as I hope to be able to tell you more particularly, at another time."

The next day when I went in, she seemed, after a little while, to muster her remaining strength, and gather up her thoughts for what she called "something in particular." She said to me, (speaking with great effort, and slowly and solemnly;) "I wish to thank you for instructing me as you have done, out of the scriptures. I hope you will continue to press

upon your people, as you are accustomed to do, the Bible itself. The forms of religion are nothing. Since I have been sick, it has been a great comfort to me to go to the Bible. I can remember the chapters I have heard you read in the church, and the texts, and the doctrines I have heard you preach; and now they comfort me. Many a time when I have gone to church, I should have been pleased, I suppose, to hear you preach some fanciful sermon, as some ministers I know do; but you would come out with some scripture doctrine, and urge us to examine the Bible, and see if these things were not so; and it has done me a great deal of good. I think it has been the means—one great means, of fixing my faith just on the scriptures, so that now I am comforted by them. If you had not done so, I never should have had this strong faith in my God. I might have got it, perhaps, in some other way, if you had not preached so, and insisted upon the scriptures so much; but it seems to me that I never should. And I want you to keep on so, and God will bless you in it. I want you to continue to urge upon the people, as you used to, the Bible truths and doctrines. They will not all like it any better than I did at first; but I hope the Lord will instruct them to hear his great truths. They have done me good,—great good. They comfort me now. Some ministers talk about other things, such as the lives of men; but that does not do me any good, except the lives of those mentioned in the Bible. Your preaching led me to examine God’s word, to see if the things you preached were so there; and I found them so. I thank you for it all. I hope you will urge it still upon the people to turn to the Bible, and find the truths you preach there. The Bible is enough. It is precious to me. It contains all I want. I hope you will not be discouraged, if the people do dislike, some of them, your humbling, solemn way. Keep on. They may learn better, as I did. And then they will have precious promises, and precious doctrines to lead them, and not care about forms and ceremonies, or speculations and fancies.”

On another occasion, when I saw her, she spoke of herself. “I am to die very soon; and I am ready to die. I did not think, last night, that I

should be here, to-day. I slept a little. This dreadful pain had exhausted me; and when I waked up, I was sorry to find myself here. I hoped I should have been with Christ. I would not be impatient; but I hope God will take me away soon. I do not fear death. Some people speak of it as a dark valley; and so I suppose it is, of itself. I believe the scriptures call it so. But it is no dark valley to me. It is all light. The promises shine on it. They shine beyond it. Christ is with me, and I trust him.”

The day but one before she died, she said to me:—“I took the Bible to read this morning, and I came upon the place where Paul speaks of being ‘clothed upon with our house which is from heaven.’ It led me to think of what I am just coming to. I hope I have got almost home; and I trust I shall not be disappointed. I am now ready to go. God has been very merciful to me, keeping my mind in this perfect faith and peace. When I was first taken sick, I had been in a cold, backsliden state; and I murmured, for some time. But I am fully satisfied now. My trials have been good for me,—all good. God does all for me that I want, through my Lord Jesus Christ. He has brought me to these sufferings, and I thank him,—I thank him for it all. He has been with me, and kept me full of peace and joy. I have settled all my worldly affairs; and I have nothing now to do, but to think of God and heaven. I have given up all.

“I have been surrounded with kind friends,—nothing but kindness all the time; and their kindness overcomes me, and brings these tears. I have found it difficult to be reconciled to part with them, and give them all up; but I have been able to do it satisfactorily. Some of them I hope to meet in heaven. (She mentioned their names.) They are professors of religion; and I hope true Christians. But what grieves me most of all is, that I must leave some of them, not knowing that we shall ever meet again! (She mentioned their names.) They are not professors, and I suppose are not Christians! I do not know as I shall ever see them again! This grief overwhelms me! I don’t know what will become of them!—But grace is all-sufficient,—I leave them with God.

“I have always felt that a Christian ought to die rejoicing. In dying we are going home to our Saviour. Christ is with me all the time, and gives me peace,—sweet peace to my soul;—and I hope he will not leave me in the last hour. I trust he will not. I have been afraid my faith would fail then, when I come to the waves of Jordan; but I trust him, and I am happy to think I have got so near home.”

Such were some of her death-bed expressions. Her joy increased as she neared her end, till it became the most triumphant and rapturous exultation; and she died with the words of joy and ecstasy literally upon her lips:—an unfinished word of praise and exultation being the last word she attempted to utter. It was commenced on earth, and finished in heaven.