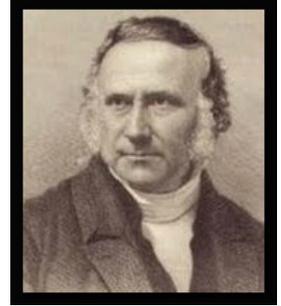


No Escape



In conversation with a young man, who desired to unite with the church, he surprised me very much by a reference which he made to his former “detestation of religion,” as he called it, and by mentioning the manner in which he was first led to any considerable concern in reference to his salvation. I had known him with some intimacy for several months, had frequently conversed with him as a serious inquirer, and afterwards as one who entertained a hope in Christ. But he had never before mentioned to me so definitely the means of his awakening, and his previous opposition to religion.

He belonged to a pious family; his parents and several of his brothers were members of the church; he was a moral and staid, industrious, intelligent young man, always attending church, and was a teacher in the Sabbath school. I had not supposed that his feelings of opposition to religion had ever assumed the strong character which he described to me now; and I had never known the means of their alteration. I happened to ask him,—

“Mr. H—, what was it that first called your attention definitely to religion, when you began to make it a matter of your personal concern?” “I found there was no escape, I could not get away from it.”

“What do you mean, when you say ‘there was no escape?’”

“Why the subject met me everywhere. Wherever I went there was something to make me think of it.”

“Yes,” said I, “there are things to bring it to mind all around us and always, if we would heed them. God has filled His world with things suggestive of Himself.”

“Oh, sir,” said he, “I don’t mean that at all. It is true, that now almost everything makes me think of God and my duty; but I mean things that were done on purpose to catch me. It seemed to me that I was pursued everywhere. There was no getting away. If I went to church on Sunday; you never let us off with a descriptive or literary sermon, like a college professor; you always had something about faith, or repentance, or depravity, or the duty of sinners to fly to Christ. If I went to my store on a week day, thinking I should escape there, because I had something else to attend to; my partner would have something to say to me about religion, or something to say in my presence which I knew was meant for me. If I met you in the street; you were sure not to let me pass without bringing up that subject in some way or other. If I went home to dinner or tea; religion would be talked of at the table. If I was spending any part of the evening in the family after I left the store; it was the same thing again: religion, religion would come up; everyone had something to say which made me think of religion. If I went off to bed, (as I did many a time to get out of the hearing of it;) my sister had put a tract upon my pillow. I could not bear all this. I often avoided everybody and went to my room, where I could be alone, and think of what I pleased; and there the first thing to meet me would be some religious book, which my mother or some one else had put in the place most likely to attract my attention; and perhaps left it open at some passage marked on purpose for me. After several of my young associates had become Christians, and began to talk about religion; I avoided them and sought other company, and pretty soon they began to talk religion too! I was provoked at it!”

“Did these people, who endeavored to influence you, treat you rudely or impolitely?”

“Oh, no! That was the worst of it. I hoped they would. If they had been meddlesome and impudent, I should have had something to find fault with, and should have told them to mind their own business, and

keep their religion to themselves. I should have said, that religion makes men ungentlemanly, and unfit for society,—and so should have excused myself. But there was none of that. There was little said to me. All that was done, was only calculated to make me think for myself, and of myself; and so I could not complain. But religion came up before me on all sides; whichever way I turned, morning, noon, and night, it was there. I could not escape it.”

“Did you have a strong desire to escape it?”

“Yes, I did. I turned every way. I avoided Christians. One Sunday, I stayed away from church;—but that contrivance worked the other way, for I could think of nothing but religion all the morning, and so in the afternoon I went to church, to see if I couldn’t forget it there. When I came home I went into an unoccupied room, because they began to talk about the sermon in the parlor; and the first thing that met me was the Bible,—laid open at the second chapter of Proverbs, and a pencil-mark drawn round the first six verses. “This is some of mother’s work,” said I. Finally, I resolved to sell out my store, and get away into some place where I should not be tormented about religion any longer. I began to make arrangements for selling out.”

“Well, sir, what altered your mind?”

“Why, just as I was in this trouble to get away from religion, resolving not to live any longer in such a place as this; I began to think what I was after,—why I desired to get away. And then I soon found out it was because I desired to get away from the truth, and away from God. That alarmed me, and shamed me. I thought, then, that if there was no escape from men here, there could be no escape from God anywhere. And though it cost my pride a hard struggle, I made up my mind that I was all wrong, and I would attend to my salvation. Then I began; but I don’t think I ever should have begun, if I had not been hunted in every place where I tried to escape.”

“Did you have any more temptation to neglect religion after that?”

“No. I immediately took my stand. I went among the inquirers openly. Then I was disappointed to find how little I cared any longer for

the world, for what people would say, and all such things, as I used to think would be great trials to me. And I believe now, there is very much gained by getting a sinner to commit himself on this matter. Then he will not wish to get off.”

“What way do you think is most likely to succeed for inducing anyone ‘to commit himself’ to attend to his religion ?”

“Oh, I cannot answer that. Any way is good, I suppose, which will lead people to think. Judging from my own experience, I should suppose that no irreligious person in the world could put off religion any longer, if his way was hedged up as mine was, so that he could not avoid thinking of the subject.”

Such was a part of my conversation with him. He united with the church; and I have some reason to suppose, that since that time he has aimed to “lead people to think,” in such a manner that there could be “no escape.”

Thoughtlessness is the common origin of unconcern. We do a far better office for men when we lead them to think, than when we think for them. A man’s own thoughts are the most powerful of all preaching. The Holy Spirit operates very much by leading men to reflection—to employ their own mind. I should hesitate to interrupt the religious reflections of any man in the world, by the most important thing I could say to him. If I am sure he will think, I will consent to be still. But men are prone to be thoughtless, and we must speak to them to lead them to reflection.

But the instance of this young man contains, as I think, a most important lesson. It appears to show, that Christian people may easily exercise an influence upon the minds of the worldly; and I have often thought such an influence is the very thing which the church needs, more than almost anything else. There is many a member of the church having faith, having benevolence, and sincerely desirous of the conversion of sinners, who never has once opened his lips to commend religion to the careless, and has never in any way attempted to lead them to serious reflection. It is not too much to say, that this is wrong. Surely it cannot be right for the people of God to wrap their talent in a napkin and hide it in

the earth! In some mode, almost every Christian in the midst of us is able to influence the thoughts of the careless every day. By conversation, by timely remarks, by books, by Tracts, and by a thousand nameless methods, they have opportunity to impress religious truth upon indifferent minds. There is too much neglect of this. The irreligious often notice this neglect; and whenever they notice it, they are very apt to have a diminished esteem for religious people, if not for religion itself. A minister cannot go everywhere and speak to every body in the community, but private Christians can. Such Christians are meeting the ungodly daily, they know them, they associate with them, work with them, trade with them, and it would be easy for them to awaken many a sinner, whom a minister cannot reach. Such exertion is one great want of the church. There are few irreligious persons in the midst of us who are compelled to say, "there is no escape."