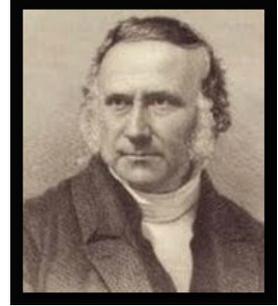


Superficial Conviction



There was much opposition to religion, at one time, among a few young men; in the place where I was settled. It was in a season of revival. Probably the gospel was then preached with more than ordinary plainness. The complaint was made, that there was too much said about the justice of God, the terrors of the Law, and the wickedness of the human heart. They said that I “exaggerated,” in respect to the danger of sinners, and made God appear as a terrible and odious Being; which was “no way to lead men in religion.”

Just at this time, I was informed, that some young men were determined to attend the meeting in the evening, with stones in their pockets to stone me on the spot, if I ventured to preach about “depravity,” and “sinners’ going to hell.” This was an indication, I thought, that the doctrines of divine justice and human wickedness had alarmed them, and that these arrows ought to be “made sharp in the heart of the king’s enemies.” Therefore, I preached, that evening, on these two points, the wickedness of men, and the anger of God against the wicked. There was no disturbance. Nobody stoned me. The opposers were present, and were seated near together. In the first part of the sermon, there was an occasional whisper among them, but they soon became attentive, and our meeting was one of stillness and deep solemnity. Immediately after the service, I attended an inquiry meeting, to which I had publicly invited all unconverted sinners, who were disposed prayerfully to study divine truth. Some of the young men met me at this

meeting. Within a few months some of them united with the church. Among them, there was one, who told me, at the time of his examination for church membership, that what had been reported of him was not true,—that he “had not carried stones in his pockets prepared to stone me.” Said he, “I know my heart was wicked enough to do almost anything, but it never was bad enough to do that.”

I noticed this expression. It was an unusual thing to hear such a remark. Directly the opposite was common. I therefore examined this young man the more carefully. But he appeared sensible of his natural depravity, so humble, so docile, and so determined to live a life of holiness, that he gained my confidence, and he was received into the church. I thought that he might be a true believer, and still his views of divine doctrine be erroneous; and I knew very well, that many people regarded me as too strict on points of doctrine. And though I believed, and had always acted on the principle, that true experimental religion will always lead its subjects to a knowledge of the great essential doctrines of the Christian system,—indeed, that to experience religion is just to experience these doctrines,—I came to the conclusion, that this principle would not adjudge him to be unfit to become a communicant. As long as he remained in the place, (about two years,) he lived apparently a Christian life. But after he removed to a neighboring city, away from his religious associates, and under a—new kind of influences; he soon began to neglect public worship, violate the Sabbath, and finally became a profane and intemperate man. I called to see him, and conversed with him. He was entirely friendly to myself; but he appeared blinded and hardened. He said he did not think himself to be very wicked: “Indeed,” says he, “I never did think my heart was so bad as some people tell of. I never did much hurt; and as to being so bad that I can’t reform, I know that I can turn from sin when I please.”

Probably my exertions for him did no good. The last that I heard of him was, that he grew worse and worse, and would probably die a miserable and drunken man.

I have often thought, that a truly regenerate man cannot have any doubt of the entire depravity of the heart. If he does not see that, it is probable that he does not see his heart. and hence, his repentance, his faith in Christ, and his reliance upon the Holy Spirit, will probably, all of them, be only deceptions. My observation continues to confirm me more and more in the opinion, that to experience religion, is to experience the truth of the great doctrines of divine grace.