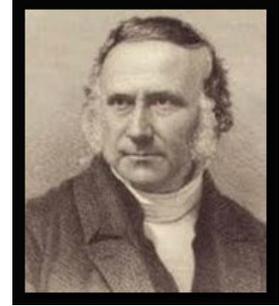


The Last Step



For the purpose of learning as much as possible, about the workings of the human heart, I have been accustomed, in conversing with those who have been led to indulge a hope in Christ, to ask them questions, whose answers might be beneficial to me, in my intercourse with others. “As in water face answereth to face, so the heart of man to man.” It is not probable, that the consciousness of such persons will always be very extensive. Some are not likely to recollect the processes of their own mind. But it is probable, that such consciousness will have much truth in it; and that thereby we may sometimes get a clear understanding of the operations of the Holy Spirit, .and of the difficulties or errors, which keep sinners from repentance. On this matter, the conceptions of an uneducated or an ignorant man are not worthy of so much regard probably, as those of a well trained and discriminating mind. Fanaticism will soon expose itself, when its own consciousness is appealed to, and is compared with the truth of God.

To those who have recently indulged a religious hope, I have many times put such a question as this;—what kept you so long from Christ?—or, what was your hindrance?—or, what were you trying to do, in all that time, while you were so anxious about religion, and had not attained the hope you have now? I have never received but two answers to that question. The answers, indeed, in the form or words of them have been various; but they might all be reduced to two in substance, if not to one.

A highly educated man, a fine scholar and very careful thinker, gave me one of them;—a man, at that time an officer in one of our colleges, and who afterwards filled an important station in a public institution, as a man of science. He had been for some weeks very anxious and prayerful. He had often sought conversation with me, and I had told him all the truth of God, and his own duty, as well as I could. Very manifestly he had disliked, if he had not disbelieved what I said to him, in respect to prayer and a sinner's dependence upon the Holy Spirit. On one occasion, after I had been urging upon his heart and conscience some of the fundamental and plain truths of the gospel, he said to me; "this is too doctrinal". I therefore concluded, that just such doctrinal instruction and urgency were the very things his case required, and continued ever afterwards to employ them, when I conversed with him. At another time, he stated to me the speculative preferences and habits of his own mind; and expressed his opinion, that such a mind needed "views of truth adapted to its calibre," as he expressed it. I therefore took pains, ever afterwards, to simplify everything as much as possible, and talk to him, as I would talk to any unlettered man or to a child. When I referred to the scriptures and quoted their language in its connection, and showed how one passage was explained by another, and how the truths I urged upon him were perfectly consistent with all the other scriptures, and how these truths of God must not be set aside in our experience, but that our religious experience must mainly consist in experiencing just these doctrines or truths of God; he became silent, but I did not think he was satisfied. He appeared convinced, but not in the least relieved.

After he had reached a different state of mind, he came to me again; and stated to me his views and feelings, with a clearness, that I have seldom known equalled. His mind seemed as light as day. "Faith is the great thing," said he. "Simplicity is better than speculation." After conversing with him for a time, I thought I should like to know, how such a clear and strong mind would judge in respect to the hindrances, which keep convicted sinners from salvation. I therefore said to him:—

“You have been a long time attentive to religion; what hindered you, that you did not come to repentance before?”—Says he,

“Allow me to tell you about myself. I have studied religion for years. It is no new subject to me. Three or four times before now, I have had my attention arrested and have been over all this process of conviction, and prayer, and anxiety, everything, but the last step.”

“What was that step?” said I.

“Giving up all to God!” was his emphatic reply. He then went on to say: “I was like a man trying to climb over a rail fence. I went up one rail, and then another, and another, till I got to the top; and then got down again and went on, the same side as before. That has always been the way with me, before now. But now, I hope I have got over. I have been brought to give up all to God.”

“What do you mean by giving up all to God?”

“I mean,” said he, “consenting to let him rule; to let him do with me as he pleases, and trust him to do everything for me through Jesus Christ.”

“How came you to get over the fence now?”

“Because I gave up all, and God took me over.”

This was his consciousness. So far as he could himself understand the process of conversion, the turning point lay just here,—“I gave up all to God.”

All true converts may not be conscious of any special act of the Holy Spirit in their regeneration. Minds are not all equally discriminating. Some are confused in respect to what passes within them. But with discriminating minds there will ordinarily be the clear impression, that something has been done for the soul beyond its own power. This impression, indeed, is no unfit test in every case of religious hope. If it is entirely wanting, we may well doubt the reality of the believed conversion. No matter how it is expressed. The words are nothing. But the thing is essential. The Holy Spirit is the Author of regeneration, and why should not the subject of his operations be expected to have a consciousness, that a power beyond his own has acted for him? and has done for him, what was never done before? That “effectual calling is the work of God’s Spirit,” has ordinarily constituted one of the things which true converts have learned by their own experience. In some way or another, this idea will come out, as they are giving a reason for the hope that is in them. “He sent from above; he took me; he drew me out of the deep waters, and established my goings upon the rock.” Moral suasion experience is a very suspicious sort of experience. There is a better kind:—“I gave up all to God, and he took me over.” And more. Impenitent sinners need to be convinced of their dependence on a power beyond their own. They need this especially. It is an essential point. Such a conviction will tend to drive them off from their miserable self-reliances. It will never put them at rest, but lead them to work, to prayer. Aside from such a conviction, they will be ignorant of the extent of their depravity; their seriousness will lack depth; and their seeking lack earnestness. The just sense of the amount of their criminality for continuing in their impenitence cannot be brought home to their hearts, unless the doctrine of their dependence helps to bring it there. The Holy Spirit is their offered aid; and surely that aid is enough. They should know, and feel it to their heart’s core, that they are now, on the spot, to-day, under the most solemn obligations to repent, not only because sin is wrong, but because God offers them the aids of the Holy Spirit: “in me is thy help.” Their impenitence not only tramples under

foot the blood of the covenant but also does despite to the Spirit of Grace.