



Unconscious Conversion

In the discharge of pastoral duty I have never been more deeply interested or more perplexed, than I was in the case of a very affectionate and intelligent woman, whom I knew with great intimacy for several years. She was a married woman before I became acquainted with her. She was young in life, I suppose not more than twenty-five, and her husband was probably about thirty—not a religious man. I visited her as her pastor, soon after she had removed from another part of the country, and taken up her residence in the place where I lived. I was much pleased with her. She was a woman of refined manners, of excellent sense, of trained mind, of gentle and affectionate disposition, but with all of unusual firmness, having a mind and a heart of her own. Few women, as I believe, have ever adorned their station more than she adorned hers. As a wife, mother, friend; as a neighbor, as a daughter, (for I became acquainted with her parents and knew her demeanor towards them,) she was a pattern of propriety. A stranger to her might have deemed her manner somewhat reserved and cold, (as indeed it was to strangers,) for there was no forwardness about her. She was modest, unassuming, unobtrusive. But her reserve wore off by acquaintance; and though she never became imprudent, and never lost a just sense of a woman's dignity, she became peculiarly confiding and companionable. However, she was rather taciturn than talkative. Like a woman of sense, she took care whom she trusted, and what she said.

But there was a shade of melancholy which seemed to hang around her, quite noticeable to a keen observer, and yet not so distinct as to be

visible, perhaps, to most of her acquaintance. Her half pensive look gave an additional interest to her intelligent countenance, (which had no small claims to be denominated beautiful,) and indeed there seemed to be a cast of sadness thrown over the very movements of her tall and graceful figure.

When I first became acquainted with her, I noticed this tender melancholy which hung around her like the shadow of a cloud; and I supposed that the twilight of some affliction still lingered around her heart, or that some secret grief was buried deep in her own bosom. After a more intimate acquaintance with her, I came to the conclusion that she had some trial of which she never spoke, but which preyed in secret upon her heart. I thought her appearance indicative of a concealed grief, which, like a worm in the bud, was preying upon her life.

On account of this opinion, I aimed to mention the subject of religion to her, in the most delicate and affectionate manner possible. I called upon her for that purpose. I found her alone. After a few moments of conversation I said to her,—

“I have several times mentioned the subject of religion to you, Mrs. C—, but you have been quite reserved; and I have called upon you to-day to converse with you upon that subject, if you will allow me such a favor.”

“I am glad to see you, sir.”

“Allow me to ask you whether you are a member of the church?”

“No sir, I am not.”

“And do you think you are still living in unbelief, after all your opportunities?”

“I suppose, sir, I have no reason to think I am a Christian,” said she, with a look of mingled solemnity and sorrow.

“Is it wise for you to neglect your salvation?”

“I know it is not wise, sir. My own heart condemns me,” said she with much emotion.

“Then, madam, do not neglect it any longer. The favor of God is within your reach. He calls to you in His gracious kindness, and invites you to turn to Him for pardon and peace, freely offered to you through

the great Redeemer of sinners. But how comes it about, Mrs. C—, that you have neglected salvation so long?”

“I do not know, indeed, sir. I suppose I have been too worldly, and too much led away by my own heart, though I have thought about religion a great deal all my life.”

“I suppose so too. And I know you ought, instantly, to ‘deny yourself, and take up your cross and follow Jesus Christ,’ and not suffer your heart to be led away any longer.”

She was much affected. I asked her some questions which she did not answer, because (as I then supposed), of a conflict in her own mind, betwixt a sense of duty and the love of the world. I therefore urged her as solemnly and affectionately as I could, to give her attention to religion without delay, and left her.

Again I called to see her. I inquired,—

“Have you been giving your attention to religion since I saw you?”

“I have thought of it very often, sir.”

“And have you prayed about it very often?”

“I have tried to pray,” said she sadly; “but I do not know as it was true prayer.”

“Do you feel your need of God’s blessing, as an undone sinner, condemned by the law of God, and having a wicked heart?”

“Sometimes I think I feel it; but I suppose I do not feel it as much as I ought to.”

“Do you feel that you need Christ to save you?”

“I know it, sir; but I am afraid I do not feel it. My heart seems hard, very hard; I wonder at myself, my stupid self.”

“It must be a very senseless or stupid heart, my dear friend, if it cannot feel the most solemn matter, save one, in all the universe. Nothing short of perdition itself, can be a more affecting and solemn thing, than to be an undone sinner without Christ to save you!”

“I am very sensible of my stupidity. I have often wondered at myself. I have tried to feel, but—”

She was overcome by this thought, and could not finish the sentence. She wept bitterly, though she evidently strove hard to control her emotions. "Pardon my infirmity, sir," said she. "I do not know why it is, but I cannot restrain my feelings. I hope you will not think me quite a child."

I assured her of my entire respect for her, and my attachment to her as a friend; that I was unwilling to say one word to make her unhappy, but that I wanted her attention to a happiness unequalled and everlasting.

"I know it, sir, I know it; and I thank you for all your kindness to me," said she with tears.

I besought her to "come freely, and affectionately, and fully to Christ, without any distrust and with out any delay, because salvation is by free grace."

Afterwards I had several interviews with her, in all of which she was solemn and much affected, but ordinarily her words were few. I told her from time to time the same truths, which I was accustomed to urge upon the attention of other anxious inquirers. I referred her to the same texts, the same promises, the same cautions and directions. Months passed on in this way, and still she found no peace of mind, no hope. She did not come out of her darkness into the light of faith, as I had so long and so confidently expected; nor did she become any less solemn or less studious or less tender in feeling, as latterly I had so much feared. Indeed, at almost every interview I had with her, she would be melted into tears in spite of all her efforts; and then she would beg me to "pardon her weakness," as she called it, and apologizing for her emotions, she would say,— "I would not afflict you with these tears if I could help it. I know it must be painful to you to see me affected in this manner, after all you have done for me; and I feel that my state of mind is but a poor return for your kindness. But I assure you, my dear Pastor, I am not ungrateful to you, if I am unhappy."

I soothed and comforted her all in my power, with the promises of God, and encouragements to trust in Him. I reasoned with her, and aimed to reach her conscience, and win her heart to the love of Christ.

Again and again I taught her all God's truth, which I thought adapted to her state of mind. She heard it all attentively, kindly, and, as I sometimes thought, gladly. She never uttered an objection, complaint, or excuse. I confidently believed, as she continued to seek the Lord so assiduously, she would soon find peace, or be left to return to indifference. But it was not so with her. Through many months she continued, so far as I could see, in the same state,—solemn, tender, prayerful ordinarily, but un comforted.

Her condition perplexed me, and very much grieved me. I had become greatly attached to her as a friend, and I believe she respected and loved me as her minister; and I could feel no reconciliation to the idea that she should continue in this unhappy condition. I blamed myself very much, for I supposed I must have failed to instruct her appropriately, even though she was desirous to be taught,—perhaps had not sufficiently explained the way of salvation, insisting upon those great doctrines of truth, through which the Holy Spirit leads sinners to repentance. Consequently I called upon her again, resolved to probe her heart, and, after some little conversation, inquired of her,—

“Have you yet found your heart at peace with God?”

“No sir, I am not at peace,—I am far from it.”

“Do you still remain in the same state of mind that you have been in so long?”

“I am sorry to say, sir, that I can tell you nothing new about myself,—nothing different from what I have told you before.”

“And certainly, madam, I can tell you nothing new,—can preach no new gospel, can tell you nothing different from what I have told you before. If you do not obey the gospel, nothing can save you. The gospel will not change. You must change. The gospel offers Christ to you, to enlighten you, to atone for you, to defend you from every danger. And since this offer is so free, and so kind, and so appropriate, and is made in the infinite sincerity of God, what hinders you that you do not accept it, and trust your Saviour humbly, penitently, gladly?”

“I wish, sir, I could tell what hinders,” said she, sadly.

“My dear friend,” said I, “have you ever really felt, and do you feel now, that you are an undone sinner, and have infinite need of Christ to save you?”

“Yes sir, I think I do. I never have had any doubt of that. I know I am undone, and I know I need Christ; but perhaps I do not feel it as I should.”

“Do you want to feel it?”

“Yes, I know I do,” said she, with some difficulty, and burst into tears. “I have prayed a great many times to be enabled to feel it more, if that is what I lack.”

“Allow me to ask you if you have ever been fully convinced that you have by nature an evil heart, depraved, ‘deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked?’”

“Yes sir; I know I have. I cannot conceive how anybody can doubt that, after examining himself at all. Perhaps I am worse than I suppose, or I should not continue in this sad state. I am fully sensible there is nothing in myself but sin.”

“And do you think you can make your heart any better?”

“I am sure I can do nothing for myself. Certainly, I ought to be convinced of that by this time.”

“Are you fully sensible that nothing but the Holy Spirit can meet the necessities of your poor heart, and bring you to Christ?”

“Yes, I have long felt it. I am sure I ought to know that, for I have tried often enough of myself to turn to God, and my heart is still the same.”

“Why don’t you give that heart to God; and trust Him to renew it and control it, since you find all your own efforts vain?”

“I have often tried to do so, but it seems to be all useless.”

“Do you constantly pray for Divine assistance?”

“I have always been accustomed to pray, in my poor way. At times I have neglected prayer for a little while, when I thought it did no good, and was afraid I should rely too much upon the mere act of praying, and

when I have thought God would not accept such prayers as mine. But I do not often neglect daily prayer.”

“Do you seek the Lord with all your heart?”

“I suppose not, sir; for if I did I should not remain in this miserable condition. I try, but it seems I fail.”

“Do you rely upon any righteousness of your own to save you, or commend you to Christ?”

“I have no righteousness. I know very well there is nothing in me but sin and misery.”

“Do you try to make a righteousness out of repentance, or humiliation, or faith, and thus expect your religion to commend you to the Saviour? Sinners sometimes seek religion, and think they must. But the Bible never tells them to seek religion—it tells them to ‘seek the Lord.’ And when they seek religion, in order to have their religion render them acceptable to God, all that is nothing but an operation of a self-righteous spirit. Do you think of being accepted in this way, instead of expecting God to receive you as you are, a sinner to be saved?”

“Perhaps it may be so, through the deceitfulness of my heart; but I am not conscious of it. I have thought of that point very often, since you explained to me the difference betwixt trusting to the righteousness of Christ, and aiming to establish a righteousness of our own.”

“Don’t you love the world too well?”

“The love of the world tempts me, I am afraid, sometimes; but I feel that I am willing to forsake all for Christ.”

“Are you willing now to give up yourself into the hands of Christ to save you, denying yourself in order to serve Him?”

“It seems to me that I am; but I suppose it cannot be so, for if I was I should not feel as I do.”

“Christ offers to receive you freely, now, just as you are. He invites you to trust Him. Why do you refuse?”

“I do try; I have tried; I have tried for a long time, but I—” (her voice faltered, she could say no more.) I waited a little time for her to become composed, and then inquired,—

“Let me ask you, my dear friend, with all respect and affection, don’t you indulge in some sin (sin of enmity, or envy, or discontent, or something else), some sin that keeps you from peace of conscience and peace with God?”

“No sir, I am not conscious of any such sin. I know I sin all the time. I struggle against it, but I do not indulge myself in any sin that I know of. If there is any such thing that keeps me from my Saviour, I should be glad to know what it is.”

I recited to her some of the divine promises and directions as I had often done before, prayed with her, and left her.

Such conversations with her were repeated. She continued still the same. It was evident, as I thought, that I had not been able to profit her at all. In order to have a more perfect knowledge of her, if possible, I sometimes called upon her without saying a word upon the subject of religion. Her manner, as cordial, and her conversation cheerful; but the old shade of pensiveness that hung around her, like a mysterious spirit, cast a sort of tender and touching melancholy over her whole appearance.

Several years had now passed away since my acquaintance with her commenced. She had been called to pass through some severe trials, in which I had sympathized with her and aimed to lead her to improve them rightly. She appeared to repose in me the most perfect confidence, told me her sorrows, consulted me in her difficulties, but continued without hope.

At one time I had great expectation that she would soon turn to her Lord in faith. She had a daughter, a young girl of sixteen perhaps, who became interested about religion and was led to hope in the mercy of God through Jesus Christ. For this lovely daughter she was most intensely anxious and prayerful. I strove to make use of this solicitude for her child, and of God’s mercy to her, now in the bloom of her youth and beauty, as a means of leading the pensive-hearted mother to the same fountain of life. All this failed.

On one occasion when I called to see her, I asked,—“Have you made any progress towards religion?” With trembling voice she answered,—

“I do not know as I can say anything to you, sir, on that subject, which I have not often said to you before. I am sorry to be obliged to tell you so. It must be very discouraging and unpleasant to you, after all your kindness and attempts to do me good. I do feel grateful to you for your attentions to me and to my child; but I make you a poor return when I am always compelled to tell you the same thing about myself, and meet you with these tears. I know it must be unpleasant to you. I wonder you have not been discouraged with me and left me long ago.”

“My dear lady, don’t think of me. It is God, whose kindness ought to affect you, and attract you instantly to his arms. I am sorry for you—my heart bleeds for you. I cannot give you up. I do believe God has mercy in store for you.”

“I am sure my heart requites your kindness, my dear pastor; I am not ungrateful for it.”

“And will you be grateful to God, to Christ Jesus, your suffering Lord, who bore the curse for you, who grappled with death and the devil for you, and opened your way into heaven?”

“I hope I am not ungrateful to Him,” said she, sobbing aloud.

“Do you trust in Him, as a Friend to save you?”

“Oh! I am afraid not.”

“You may—a thousand times, ‘you may.’ ‘Come, for all things are ready.’”

I could only exhort her, and pray for her. I called on her again, and our interview was much the same as usual. I did not know but I was making her unhappy by my constant solicitations, and perhaps doing her harm; so I said to her,—

“My dear child, I will not press this subject upon your attention any more, if it is unpleasant to you to have me mention it. I have loved you, and aimed to do you good; but I have failed. I do not wish to make you unhappy. I will leave you hereafter entirely to yourself, if you desire it, and never say a word more to you on the subject of your religion.”

Covering her face again with her handkerchief, she wept convulsively, as I went on to say,—

“I will do just as you desire; I will continue to offer you Christ and his salvation, or be silent on the whole subject, just as is most agreeable to—”

“Ok, sir,” (interrupting me,) “I do not wish you to leave me. I wonder your patience has not been exhausted, and I am sensible it must pain you to see me always in this tearful condition. I am sorry to make you unhappy; but I hope you will never think me pained by your visits. I am not, I assure you. Almost my only hope is—“

She could say no more, and I could utter no reply. I prayed with her, and promised to see her again. She demanded a promise.

On a future occasion, as I was conversing with her, I asked her,—

“Is it not strange that you do not love such a God?”

Greatly to my surprise, she answered,—

“I think I do love God, sir.”

“How long do you think you have loved Him ?”

“Ever since I was a little child. I cannot remember the time when I did not love Him. It has always seemed to me, as well as I know my own heart, that I did love God.”

With amazement, I inquired,—

“Why did you never tell me this before?”

“I was afraid you would think me better than I am.”

“And do you hate sin?”

“I have always hated it, (if I can judge of my own feelings,) ever since I can remember.”

“Why do you hate sin ?”

“Because it offends God, it is wrong, and because it makes me unhappy.”

“Do you desire to be free from it?”

“Yes, I do, if I know anything at all of my own desires.”

“Do you love to pray?”

“Yes, I love to pray,—it is my most precious comfort. Sometimes I feel it a task, I am afraid; when I fear that I am not sincere, and that my prayers are an offense.”

“Is prayer a relief to you in trouble?”

“Sometimes it is. At other times a burden lies on my heart, which I cannot leave with God; indeed, commonly I have a burden left, because I am afraid I am not right with God.”

“Do you rely on Christ to save you?”

“I have nothing else to rely upon; but I am afraid I do not rely upon Him as much as I ought.”

“Do you wish to rely upon Him?”

“Yes, I do. It is my constant prayer that I may be able to do so. I know He is able and willing to save even me, unworthy as I am. I have never doubted that.”

“Are you willing to trust Him to save you?”

“I certainly wish to trust Him.”

“Do you receive Him as your Saviour?”

“I hope so; I try to do it.”

“Do you feel grateful for what He has done for you?”

“Yes sir, I am sure I do.”

“Are you glad to be in God’s hands, and in His world, and let Him do with you as He will? You know He will, but are you glad of it?”

“Yes, I am. I would not desire to be anywhere else than in His hands. It is pleasant to me to think that He reigns over me and over all.”

“Then are you not reconciled to God?”

“I don’t know. If I was really reconciled to Him, I have always thought I should have more assurance of His favor. I am afraid to think I am reconciled.”

“Do you love God’s people?”

“Yes sir; their society has always been more pleasant to me than any other. I enjoy it.”

“Don’t you think that these feelings, which you have now expressed, are evidences of true religion?”

“I should think so, perhaps, if I had not always had them. But I have never been sensible of any particular change. I have always felt so since I was a little child, as long as I can remember.”

I was utterly amazed! Here I had been for years aiming to make conviction of sin more deep, instead of binding up the broken heart! I had been aiming to lead a sinner to Christ, instead of showing her that she was not a stranger, and an outcast! I was ashamed of myself! I had often talked to this precious woman as if she were an alien from God, and an enemy; and now it appeared as if all the while she had been one of His most affectionate children, her very anguish consisting in this,—that she loved Him no more, and could not get assurance of His love towards her. It was true she had never told me these things before; but that did not satisfy me. I ought to have learnt them before. I went out and wept bitterly! I felt as if I had been pouring anguish into the crushed heart of the publican, as he cried, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner I’

On my way home, I thought of what my old friend that whistled had said to me years before, and I was convinced that I had practically run into the error, against which his wisdom aimed to guard me. Over the recollection of the tears of anguish which I had so often caused this noble woman, in secret I poured out my own!

Afterwards I aimed repeatedly to show her what were and what were not evidences of saving faith; and she said to me more than once,—

“I should think myself a Christian if it were not for one thing; but I have had these feelings ever since I can remember: I have never been sensible of any such change as other people experience, and as the gospel mentions. I could not tell the time when I became a Christian, and am afraid to think I am a child of God.”

So she felt; and she lived after this for months, downcast and burdened, with only an occasional gleam of sunshine to gladden her heart. I deem it not improbable that that secret grief which preyed upon her heart, and cast such a shade of melancholy over all her appearance, may have damped her religious joy and hope all along. I may not here record what it was. Gradually I discovered it, and it was cause enough, I

am sure, to excuse all the melancholy which so long held possession of one of the noblest hearts that ever bled.

This woman had a pious mother. That mother taught her from her infancy, in a most faithful and affectionate manner; and it is probable that the gentle influences of the Holy Spirit renewed her heart in her early life, so that she “could not remember the time when she did not love God.”

She finally came to a calm, but feeble and timorous hope that she was indeed a Christian. She hoped hesitatingly and humbly; as she said to me, “it is almost hope against hope.” She removed to another part of the country, and there she and her daughter came, (on the same Sabbath, I believe,) for the first time to the communion table of their Lord. I have sometimes seen them since; they have sometimes done me the favor to write to me; they are still my precious friends; and I have reason to hope they are both on their way to heaven. When she arrives there, she may know what she will never know here,—the time of her conversion.

We are apt to have too limited views of God. We think we understand Him, but He constantly goes beyond us, and shames us. It is well for us to have wisdom enough to be ashamed. The man or minister, who thinks he can trace all the operations of God’s Spirit upon the souls of men, or thinks that God’s Spirit will be confined to the ways of his wisdom or modes of his imagining, knows very little of God. God sanctifies souls through the truth. That is about all that we know. If we think we have got beyond this in knowledge, and so understand the “different operations” of the Holy Spirit, that all true conversions will come within the scope of our favorite patterns, we have much yet to learn. That is a very common error with our Revivalists.

Many persons who have had a religious education, who have never thrown off the restraints of religious influence, and with whom the power of conscience and just principle has been felt, become truly the children of God, without any such sudden and sensible change in their feelings, as we often behold in others. I have learnt not to distrust the religion of such persons. They wear well. Feeling is not the only evidence of religion.

Just principles, an effective conscience, and proper habits of life, are evidences of it also.

The Rev. Dr. A—, (now gone to his rest and reward,) once the distinguished and very useful pastor of a large church in the State of New York, said to me, more than twenty years since,—“After I was settled over my church, for about fifteen years we used to receive into the church on their profession of faith, from twelve to twenty persons every year. But we had no revival. Then, there was a great revival among us, and we received in six months more than all we had received before in three years. After that we had no more gradual admissions, or only a very few, for six or seven years. And so it has been ever since for a period of twenty years. Every few years we have a revival, and after it a dearth, and then another revival. And now, if anybody should ask me, which system I prefer, the revival system or the old one, I should have no hesitation in saying the old one. I know it is not for me to choose. God is a Sovereign, and sends his Spirit as he chooses; but I am sure our prosperity, on the whole, was greater, and our converts wore better, under the old system.”