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LETTER FROM THE PASTOR

The Lord's Hand behind the Maid's Mistake

In C. H. Spurgeon's Autobiography, he includes a testimony to how the Lord led him not to attend a college for ministerial training. It might seem odd mentioning this, given that we at Emmanuel Church and our Reformed Seminary firmly believe in ministerial training! However, in exceptional cases it may not be God's will. And Spurgeon was an exceptional case. His God-given genius, sanctified and empowered by the Holy Spirit, was all the equipping necessary for his unique ministry lasting from the 1850s until his death in 1892. Here is his account.

"Soon after I had begun to preach the Word in the village of Waterbeach, I was strongly advised to enter Stepney, now Regents Park, College, to prepare more fully for the ministry. Knowing that solid learning is never an encumbrance, and is often a great means of usefulness, I felt inclined to avail myself of the opportunity of attaining it: although I hoped that I might be useful without a college-training, I consented to the opinion of friends that I should be more useful with it.

"Dr Angus, the tutor of the College, visited Cambridge, and it was arranged that we should meet at the house of Mr Macmillan, the publisher. Thinking and praying over the matter, I entered the house exactly at the time appointed, and was shown into a room where I waited patiently a couple of hours, feeling too much impressed with my own insignificance, and the greatness of the tutor from London, to venture to ring the bell, and make inquiries as to the unreasonably long delay.

"At last, patience having had her perfect work, and my school engagements requiring me to attend to my duties as an usher, the bell was set in motion, and on the arrival of the servant, the waiting young man was informed that the Doctor had tarried in another room until he could stay no longer, and had gone off to London by train. The stupid girl had given no information to the family that anyone had called, and had been shown into the drawing room; and, consequently, the meeting never came about, although designed by both parties.

"I was not a little disappointed at the moment, but have a thousand times since thanked the Lord very heartily for the strange Providence which forced my steps into another path. Still holding to the idea of entering the Collegiate Institution, I thought of writing and making an immediate application, but this was not to be.

"That afternoon, having to preach at one of the village-stations of the Cambridge Lay Preachers' Association, I walked slowly, in a meditative frame of mind, over Midsummer Common to the little wooden bridge which leads to Chesterton, and in the midst of the Common I was startled by what seemed a loud voice, but which may have been a singular illusion. Whichever it was, the impression was vivid to an intense degree; I seemed very distinctly to hear the words, "Seekest thou great things for thyself? Seek them not!" (Jeremiah 45:5).

"This led me to look at my position from another point of view, and to challenge my motives and intentions. I remembered the poor but loving people to whom I ministered, and the souls which had been given me in my humble charge; and, although at that time I anticipated obscurity and poverty as the result of the resolve, yet I did there and then solemnly renounce the offer of Collegiate instruction, determining to abide for a season at least with my people, and to remain preaching the Word so long as I had strength to do it. Had it not been for those words, in all probability I had never been where and what I now am. I was conscientious in my obedience to the monition, and I have never seen cause to regret it."

This account has some helpful lessons for us, which I just list here without much enlargement:

1. The Lord may sovereignly take a different way with His servants. Spurgeon probably would have excelled in academic attainment, but being "taught of God" in the Lord's college was for him. He joined the ranks of many who never "trained for the ministry" but excelled many who did. We think of John Bunyan, concerning whom the mighty Dr John Owen said to Charles II: "May it please your Majesty, I would gladly give up all my learning if I could preach like that tinker."

2. We should look beyond second causes to the First Cause. It was not the maid who deprived Spurgeon of his interview – it was the Lord. He ordered

and overruled her mistake. Even human mistakes are part of God's purposes. Including our own mistakes, which is a great comfort!

3. Humility in the ministry is indispensable for true usefulness. Impressively, Spurgeon was prepared to be an unknown nobody if he was where the Lord wanted him. But he became "The Prince of Preachers" in London. Truly, "before honour is humility" (Proverbs 15:33).

4. The Lord sometimes powerfully brings a Scripture to our minds. The Holy Spirit applied that verse from Jeremiah to Spurgeon at a critical time in his life. Sometimes this happens in divine guidance, and we hear an inward voice saying, "This is the way, walk ye in it" (Isaiah 30:21).

5. Whatever we forego for Christ's sake is abundantly made up to us. Was Spurgeon a loser by following the Lord's way for him? The rest of his Autobiography will give the answer.* And neither shall we lose anything by following the Lord's will and way for us, whatever it might be and however challenging it might seem. The Lord always does better for us than we could do for ourselves.

Let us believe then, that behind every human hand that makes its mistakes is the guiding Hand of God that makes no mistakes.

John P. Thackway

** The Autobiography is an unforgettable read. It originally appeared in four large volumes. The Banner of Truth published a two-volume edition, wisely abridged with some added material. Amazon has them for about £12 each, maybe cheaper elsewhere.*

FELLOWSHIP NEWS

Daniel Tribe

On Wednesday 1st November, after several months of planning and prayerful consideration, we began a new evangelistic endeavour in the form of a Seniors' Coffee Morning. Some familiar faces and some new friends joined for a cup of coffee, some cake, and conversation. God willing, the coffee morning will take place on the first Wednesday of each month. Please join us in praying

that this work will be built up and that opportunities will arise to share the gospel with these dear people.

We give thanks to the Lord that we have been able to recommence our services in Salisbury Manor Care Home in recent months. The care home had to close for building work to be done, and since then it has come under new management, but the Lord has graciously opened the door for us to return to the home and bring the good news of the gospel to the residents there.

Our dear brother and sister in Christ, Graham and Caty O have been much in our prayers following the death of Graham's sister, Jean. We're grateful to the Lord that Graham and Caty were given travelling mercies as they attended the funeral in Minehead on the 13th November. We continue to pray that Graham and Caty and all the family will be comforted by the gracious ministry of the Holy Spirit, and will be keenly aware of the Lord's presence at this sad time.

On the Lord's Day 12th November, our Pastor travelled to Shepherd's Bush to preach at the Anniversary of Uxbridge Road Tabernacle. We share in the joy of the Lord's people at Uxbridge Road and praise God for preserving a faithful witness for Christ in that part of London over many years. And we pray for their new Pastor Ibrahim Ag Mohamed, that the Lord may grant much fruit from his ministry, that the Church will be much encouraged and enlarged in the mercy of the Lord.

Friday 1st and Saturday 2nd December saw the final Study Weekend of the year at the Salisbury Reformed Seminary. The students have warmly testified to the rich blessings they have received over the last year of studies. Please continue to pray for them, that they would be divinely equipped to serve Christ faithfully in the Christian ministry, and please also pray that the Lord will call others to study at the Seminary and to be sent forth as labourers in our Lord's harvest, for the glory of His great Name. One applicant from Neil Pfeiffer's church in Swansea has so far been interviewed and accepted.

On Tuesday 5th December, the Ladies' Bible Study group met to share a time of fellowship together over a meal. This group has already proved to be a great blessing to many, as they've opened the Lord's Word together.

On Wednesday 13th December, we welcomed Mr Graham Chewter on behalf of the Trinitarian Bible Society. The work of the TBS is so vitally important as

they continue with their translation projects and distributions of the precious Word of God in many different countries. We continue wholeheartedly to support this work both prayerfully and practically, and were encouraged to hear the latest updates about this work.

We have been much in prayer for our dear brother Bob R, who has recently undergone surgery. We give God the glory for the great grace which he and Carol have exhibited. We pray that they would be daily strengthened and upheld by the Lord, as we pray likewise for all our number who have been bearing illness and difficulties at this present time.

The New Year affords us an opportunity to express our thanks to the Lord for all of His mercies over the year 2023. The Lord has met with us in our services for worship, spoken to us by His Word, and He has heard and answered our prayers, guiding us and providing for us, and preserved our unity in Christ. As we consider all that the Lord has wrought over the last twelve months we can sincerely say, "It is of the LORD's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness." (Lamentations 3:22-23).

DONALD CARGILL, THE COVENANTER (1619-1680) **"MOST IN THE MAIN THINGS"**

Professor G. N. M. Collins

An address delivered at the official closing ceremony of the Free Church College

The title of my address, as many of you will immediately notice, has a connection with Covenanting times in Scotland. It takes us back to the 27th day of July, 1681; a day when Edinburgh was agog with excitement. They had caught him at last; Donald Cargill, the preacher who had had the courage to renounce loyalty to the perfidious and profligate Charles II, and to excommunicate him and some of his most prominent minions from the Church of Christ.

But Cargill's enemies had caught up with him, and on that day in late summer 1681 they brought him to the gibbet at the Mercat Cross of Edinburgh, to

provide the crowds who gathered to the sight with a grim warning of what they might expect if the hot-heads among them persisted in the folly which had brought Cargill to his doom. They meant the event to serve the purpose of the King; but the doomed man turned it to the glory of the King of kings by giving, from the very verge of eternity, his most impressive testimony ever.

He ascended the ladder to the hangman's platform, he declared, with less fear than he had ever known in entering the pulpit to preach. It was the most joyful day of his life. Not more eagerly did his fellow-Covenanter, Samuel Rutherford, who had gone home to Immanuel's Land just thirty years before, long for the translation than he did. And not less gratefully did he acknowledge in the review of a changeful and testing life, that "e'en the dews of sorrow were lusted with His love."

Clearly, this man has a secret that he wants to share with the world, and bequeath to posterity, before he departs to be with Christ for whose crown-rights he had contended so valiantly throughout his heroic ministry. Let us listen to him as he speaks and see if we can discover it.

Reminiscently he tells us that, even after his conversion, death had remained "somewhat terrible" to him; but it was no longer so. "And however it be with me at the last," he adds, "though I should be straitened by God, or interrupted by man, yet **all is sure and shall be well. I have followed holiness. I have taught truth, and I have been most in the main things**; not that I thought the things concerning our times little, but that I thought none could do anything to purpose in God's great and public matters, till they were right in their conditions."

There are three phrases in particular in this striking utterance that are worth singling out and pondering:

(1) I have followed holiness:

In more modern times, holiness has come to denote a detachment from everyday life; a pietistic aloofness from worldly activities; an introspective absorption in the cultivation of the higher life. Now, while it is true that the idea of separation is basic in any definition of the life of holiness, it must always be borne in mind that the separation from is preparatory to a setting apart to. This comes out in the call addressed by our Lord to His first disciples; "Follow me,

and I will make you fishers of men." It meant separation from the old way of life, and a setting apart to a new, and infinitely more important, vocation.

And that was how Donald Cargill understood his call to holiness. It did not lure him to the hermit's cell; it sent him into the battlefield. To him, as to every true minister of Christ, it meant, and must always mean, a call to action. The challenge of sin had been taken up in Eden. The seed of the woman was to bruise the head of the serpent. Down the centuries the decisive victory of Golgotha was foretold and foreshadowed in the Church until in the fulness of time it became a fact of history. But the kingdom thus established had to be extended until every knee should bow to Zion's King, and every tongue confess that He is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. The victorious army was to consist of conscripts of grace, who in time past had been themselves the mercenaries of sin.

"The Son of God goes forth to war,
A kingly crown to gain;
His blood-red Banner streams afar,
Who follows in his train?"

— *Reginald Heber*

The circumstances of his own recruitment were unusual. He tells us that he had feared God from his youth, but when his father urged him to study theology with a view to his entering the ministry of the Church he recoiled with dismay from the very thought. The work of the ministry, he insisted, was too great a burden for his slender shoulders. But paternal advice influenced him, at least to the setting apart of a day for prayer and fasting to ascertain the mind of God. The desiderated guidance eventually came through the words of God to Ezekiel as we have them in Ezekiel 3:1; "Son of man, eat what thou findest; eat this roll (book), and go, speak unto the house of Israel."

The message of the book was to become, as it were, part of himself, the innermost and strongest conviction of his mind, the impelling force of his whole ministry. The delivery of the message would awaken hostility against Cargill. It had done also in the case of Ezekiel, for it was an uncompromising denunciation of the evils that were so glaringly prevalent in the high places of both Church and State at the time. But he promptly and resolutely accepted the commission, notwithstanding its attendant risks.

He "followed holiness". The following began with a believing acceptance of the offer of salvation through Jesus Christ. It issued in a complete surrender to the will and way of his royal Master as revealed in the Word and the guidance of providence. It involved expulsion from the Barony Church in Glasgow, to the inhospitable wastes of the Border moorlands. It meant persecution, wounds, imprisonment, martyrdom; yet, to the end, he could not claim that he had attained, to the full, the quality of life upon which his heart was set. "I do not say that I am free of sin," he declared; and he was speaking from the scaffold, "but I am at peace through a slain Mediator." Even yet, he had not attained, but like the great Apostle to the Gentiles, he "followed after". And when the executioner that day turned him over from the gibbet platform, the goal was reached, the prize was won. For, as the Westminster Divines put it, "The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory." Perfect holiness at last!

I have followed holiness. It is the unfailing prescription for Christian usefulness, as well as the earnest of eternal blessedness. "It is not great talents God blesses," affirms Robert Murray McCheyne, "so much as likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hands of God."

Wherefore, beloved brethren, aspirants to the ministry of the Word, stir up indeed the gift that is in you, but let not your efforts in this commendable endeavour induce slackness in the greatest pursuit of all. Follow holiness; complete separation to God, and consecration to His work. For the rough way, the shoes of iron and brass are provided; for the crushing burden, the strength that is perfected in weakness; for the unknown way, the guiding pillar of cloud and fire; and for the Christian warfare from first to last, the whole armour of God.

"Does the road wind uphill all the way?
Yes, to the very end.
Will the day's journey take the whole long day?
From morn to night, my friend."

(2) I have taught truth:

One of the most instructive exhibits that Bunyan's Christian saw in the Interpreter's house was a picture of the ideal minister of the Gospel. His eyes, we read, were lifted up to heaven, the best of books was in his hand, the law of truth was written upon his lips, the world was behind his back; he stood as

if he pleaded with men, and a crown of gold did hang over his head. If we were asked to give a name to the subject of this portrait we should not be in error if we suggested Donald Cargill: The heaven-ward look; the rejection of the world and its ways; the pleading with man; the quality of his message; the standard to which he adhered; the all-surpassing reward for which he strove. The resemblances are too many to be coincidental. The truth, of course, is that the English Puritan and the Scottish Covenanter are patterned on the same model — the model referred to by Thomas Goodwin when he writes, "Despise not the ministry, for God had but one Son, and He was a minister."

Let that mind be in us that was also in Him, in Him who said, I came that I should bear witness to the truth, and who promised His disciples when He was about to send them out in the ministry to which He had called them, "the Spirit of truth... will guide you into all truth."

The ambassador of Christ must not tamper with the message entrusted to him. He serves in a constantly changing world, and there will be times when the sophistications of the schools, and the seeming ineffectiveness of the Church in modern society, will suggest that the Gospel has lost much of its relevancy, and must therefore be adapted to the contemporary situation. The case for change can be argued with great persuasiveness in our own time.

"We must keep our theology academically respectable", insisted a speaker at a conference on Christian Education which I attended a few years ago. And nobody disagreed. Why should they? As it stood, the demand was unexceptionable. There is no virtue in obscurantism. The Gospel deserves that what talents we have should be devoted to its investigation and explication. Even then we shall never be able fully to comprehend or show forth its mysteries. There will always be what Henry Vaughan calls that "deep, but dazzling darkness" to remind us that man "cannot find out the Almighty to perfection". But "the secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him, and He will shew unto them His covenant. "Things hidden from the wise and prudent shall be revealed unto babes." Reason cannot grasp them, but faith can touch them and prove their reality. And in God's light we shall see light - light that will increase our wonder, and evoke from us as it did from the great Apostle of the Gentiles, the adoring cry "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!"

Let nothing move you away from the great verities of the Gospel, and be at pains to keep the Cross central in your message. "Jesus Christ and Him crucified," exclaims Joseph Parker, "we can make no Gospel out of any other word than 'crucified'" When this cardinal doctrine of the Christian message is neglected, the spirit of soul-winning evangelism must necessarily be absent. The sermon may excite an aesthetic pleasure and command the intellectual approval of the hearer, but if it fails to commend Christ the crucified it will also fail to extend the kingdom of God among man. "The victories of Christianity" claims J. C. Ryle, "wherever they have been won, have been won by distinct, doctrinal theology; by telling men of Christ's vicarious death and sacrifice; by showing them Christ's substitution on the cross, teaching them justification by faith, and bidding them believe on a crucified Saviour; by preaching ruin by sin, redemption by Christ, regeneration by the Spirit. This is the only teaching which for 18 centuries God has honoured with success, and is honouring at the present day both at home and abroad."

A memory of war-time comes back to me. I was in London just a day or two after the centre of the old city had been almost burned to a shell by Nazi raiders. I walked through it, appalled by the wanton destruction on every hand. Had the world gone quite mad? Was there anything left worth fighting for? Worth living for? Was this the end of our civilisation? It was a gloomy morning, and the leaden skies seemed to weep despairingly over a lost cause. But all of a sudden there was a slight break in the clouds, and a thin shaft of light shone like a spotlight for a moment on the great gilded cross which surmounts the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral, which I could just see above gaunt and broken walls. Now, I am not attracted to symbols which may themselves become objects of undue veneration, but for that moment the shining cross of St Paul's flashed a message of hope into my very soul.

"In the cross of Christ I glory,
Towering o'er the wrecks of time;
All the light of sacred story
Gathers round that head sublime."

"The preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God."

It was the power that, even on the evidence of the hostile Jews of Thessalonica in the days of the Apostles, had "turned the world upside down", and in the

course of history, has changed the destiny of nations. It is the power that will extend the Kingdom of Christ to its predestined bounds, that will still the strife of warring nations, and establish the order that is "righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost."

At a dark moment in the Second World War, when the hearts of all but the stoutest were failing them for fear, that fine soldier and statesman, Field-Marshal Smuts, rallied a great church-gathering in South Africa when he shared with them the vision that steeled his own heart with the certainty of ultimate victory. "In the twilight of today," he said, "I see on the horizon, not the man of Munich, not the man of Moscow, not the man of Rome, but the Man of Galilee. The Man of Galilee is, and remains, the only leader."

It was a word finely and timeously spoken. The man of Munich was soon off the scene. The man of Rome came to an inglorious but fitting end. The man of Moscow outlived the others, but only to be execrated by the very people who had raised him to power. But the Man of Galilee!

"His name shall endure for ever; His name shall be continued as long as the sun; and men shall be blessed in Him; all nations shall call Him blessed."

Yet in times like the present, when the church is so much in the doldrums, the urge to experiment with new methods becomes almost irresistible. And again, why not? There is no merit in stagnation. If our ideas have been born in prayer; if they will bear the test of Holy Scripture, let us by all means discuss them together in our church courts and seek the mind of the Lord. But if we find no reason to change, we have found a solid reason *not* to change.

Certainly, the pitiful gimmicry that has found its way into the church of Christ in recent times does not inspire us with any hope of improvement from that quarter. In a pronouncement on the present church situation, Professor Tom Torrance has recently said, "In our obsession with making the world relevant, we seem to have reduced preaching to being the servant of public opinion, indeed, the servant of a permissive society, and tend to lose the transforming revolutionary power of the Cross of Christ which alone can save society." That is the ever-present danger.

The sorry plight of a world that has forsaken God is a rebuke to our trifling, and constitutes a re-call to the central theme of the Gospel, Christ and Him

crucified. It is a theme that has respect to all the needs of mankind and we shall not preach it in its fulness unless we show its relevance to man, both as a sinner, and as a member of society. Like Cargill, we must teach the Truth; and teach it in its fulness. "We shall get Christ glorified on earth..." It is a great aim, and worthy of all concentration.

A Word of Caution

In the good providence of God, it will not be long now until some of you, my younger brethren, will be called to pastoral charges in the Church, and in that connection certain prescribed Questions will be put to you. Of these, there is none more comprehensive, and more searching, than Question 7 of the series.

It concerns the main things.

Let me quote it, "Are not zeal for the honour of God, love to Jesus Christ, and desire of saving souls, your great motives and chief inducements to enter into the function of the holy ministry, and not worldly designs and interests?" It is a question that sifts our inner motives, that lays bare our secret purposes, that tests the sincerity of our commitment.

May I presume to speak a word of caution to you in anticipation of that day when you are set apart for the ministry of the Word. My only reason - and indeed, qualification — for doing so is that I have made so many mistakes that I should like you to avoid.

First of all, bear in mind that the office to which you will be ordained is a ministry, not a mastery. The minister is indeed entrusted with an oversight of the flock of God, but it is to be exercised not "as being lords over God's heritage, but as being ensamples to the flock." And this will be best achieved if we bear in mind the words of the Chief Shepherd Himself, and the circumstances in which they were spoken; "I am among you as he that serveth."

Again, bear in mind the special nature of the ministry to which you will be committing yourselves. It is a ministry of the Word; a ministry which has many aspects, but in which the Gospel of reconciliation is, and must always be, predominant. It is so fatally easy to be lured away from that which is central to that which is peripheral. Your settlement in a pastoral charge will almost certainly mean that your help will be sought by various religious, benevolent

and social institutions, and, quite properly, you will want to become part of the community in which your lot is cast. The watchword here is *Be selective*; not, *Be collective*. To neglect this caution would be to copy the recklessness of the man in the Old Testament story, who was charged to keep a prisoner in close custody, and warned that failure in this duty would cost him his life. But despite the grave warning, the hapless custodian defaulted, and could think of no better excuse when called to answer for his failure than that he was "busy here and there". But there is no excuse for "such busyness" and fussiness in the work of the Lord. There is so much yet to be done, so much land yet to be possessed for Christ, that to be most in the main things is our bounden duty. "When you are running a race," remarks Dr Samuel Chadwick, "you can't stop to study botany." True; and when you are fighting a battle you dare not stop to admire the landscape. The Christian programme gives no place to sinecures. "He that hath a slight impression of his charge," says Fraser of Brea, "will never faithfully perform it." Faithfulness is what the Master requires of us; faithfulness is what the world needs from us; and faithfulness is what the Lord will commend in us at the end of the day. "If there is anything in which I would be inclined to contradict Him," said "Rabbi" Duncan, "it would be if I heard Him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant." And perhaps that is how we feel about it, and with greater reason. But God requires in the stewards of His mysteries that they be found faithful, and His judgments will not be affected by the self-exaltations of the proud, or the self-denigrations of the humble. The goodness of the stewardship will be revealed in its faithfulness, and of that quality God alone is the infallible Judge. In our ministry let us, like Donald Cargill, so live, and so serve, as to be able to say in sincerity: "I have followed holiness; I have taught truth; I have been most in the main things". And even when things are at their worst, let us brace our souls with the thought that the banner under which we serve is the standard of Him who has the promise of universal and everlasting dominion. It shall not end up in the hands of the enemy.

"So be it, Lord! Thy throne shall never
Like earth's proud empires pass away:
Thy Kingdom stands and grows forever
Till all Thy creatures own Thy sway."

(3) I have been most in the main things:

There speaks a man who believes that he has got his priorities right, not only in the sense that he has sought first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,

but also in that he realises that even in the affairs of the Kingdom of God there are different grades of importance. And because he wanted to make full proof of his ministry, he made a careful comparison of the things that matter and the things that matter most.

The indulgences granted by Charles, towards the end of the Covenanting struggle, seemed to some of the ousted ministers to offer them an opportunity to accept these more lenient measures without sacrifice of principle. But Cargill was not of that mind, and he said so. William Vilant, one of the indulged ministers, hearing of his denunciation of the Indulgences, spoke with annoyance. "What needs all this ado?" he demanded, "We will get heaven, and they will get no more." "Yes," retorted Cargill, "*we will get more. We will get God glorified on earth which is more than heaven.*"

The battle was not yet won. The objective was not yet attained. The enemy was yet scheming. The toleration shown in Charles's Indulgences was in the interests of Prelacy rather than being a concession to the Covenanters, and Cargill and his party would have none of it. To get God glorified on earth was the paramount aim of their contendings.

But never did that aim seem more impossible of accomplishment than it did on that tragic day in July 1681. The battle had gone against them. Their dauntless leader was taken from them and there was no one left to rally and inspire the dejected loyalists. Yet in the crowd who watched the martyrdom of Cargill stood a young man, scarcely out of his 'teens, for whom that day became a day of destiny.

His name was James Renwick. He had been brought up in a godly home and had been devoted to God and the ministry of the Church. He had just emerged from a period of intellectual unsettlement, but his plans for the future were still unclear. What effect, he wondered, would the death of this brave leader have upon the dispirited upholders of the Covenant who were left to continue the struggle? Was all the hard living and faithful contending to go for nothing? It was James Renwick's day of decision. "The resolution awoke within him," writes Dr Alexander Smellie, that he must take up that torch which the older confessor was compelled to lay down; and he, and no other, should be Cargill's son in the faith."

The Millmen accepted him, and for six stirring years he led them until, in the Grassmarket of Edinburgh, he followed his hero through the gates of martyrdom into everlasting glory. That was in February 1688, and before the year was ended the Royal Stewarts were off the scene and a Settlement was worked out for the Church which restored the spiritual independence which she had refused to surrender.

So, James Russell Lowell was right. "Truth" is not "forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the Throne."

"Then to side with Truth is noble
When we share her wretched crust
Ere her cause bring fame and profit
And 'tis prosp'rous to be just;
Then it is the brave man chooses,
While the coward stands aside,
Doubting in his abject spirit,
Till his Lord is crucified."

Set-backs there are, as there so often have been, but the ultimate universal triumph of Christ can never be in doubt. Calvary has settled that once and for all. In all things He shall yet have the undisputed pre-eminence.

Listen to this final word from Samuel Rutherford: "The Church hath been, since the world began, ever hanging by a small thread, and all the hands of hell and of the wicked have been drawing at the thread. But God be thanked, they only break their arms by pulling, but the thread is not broken; for the sweet fingers of Christ, our Lord, have spun and twisted it. Lord, hold the thread whole."

And we shall echo that prayer sincerely only if we ourselves – *"Follow after holiness"*; *"Teach the truth"*; and are *"Most in the main things"*.

CHAINS OF INFLUENCE

Sermons

William Jay of Bath completed 50 years in the ministry at the end of January, 1841, and a special Jubilee meeting was held to commemorate that event.

On this occasion, the Rev Timothy East from Birmingham stated that one of Mr Jay's sermons, preached in London in the early part of his ministry, was greatly blessed to the conversion of a thoughtless and dissolute young man, who himself later became a minister.

A sermon preached by that minister, in 1802, became the means of bringing Mr East to faith in Christ, just at the time when he had determined to leave England for ever.

In 1814 Mr East preached and his sermon was used powerfully to affect and savingly change a young man, who was John Williams, the missionary to the South Seas.

Books

God has greatly used Christian literature and this is a fact of history. There are six books known as the "Precious Chain of Books," by which thousands and tens of thousands of souls have been converted, and the work of these books is going on in the world at this time.

Many years ago, in 1630, an old Puritan, Doctor Richard Sibbes, wrote a book called "*The Bruised Reed*," which fell just at the right time into the hands of Richard Baxter, and brought him under the enlightening power of the Spirit of God.

Baxter's ministry became like the sun in his strength, and in turn he wrote a book entitled, "*The Call to the Unconverted*" (1657), which was blessed to the conversion of Philip Doddridge.

Doddridge's own book, "*The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*" (1745), was used to bring the truth of the Gospel to the mind and heart of William Wilberforce.

William Wilberforce, in his turn, wrote a book entitled, "*A Practical View of Christianity*" (1797) which exerted a powerful influence on Thomas Chalmers, who did such a great work in Scotland, and fired the heart of Legh Richmond

on the Isle of Wight, who was used to the blessing of an innumerable number of people.

Legh Richmond wrote, "*The Dairyman's Daughter*" (1814), a book about a young girl, Elizabeth Wallbridge, who was visited by Mr Richmond during his ministry on the Isle of Wight, and the book records their moving spiritual conversations together until the time of her death. Published at first in tract-form, there have been over 4,000,000 copies of this book printed, and its profound spiritual influence upon multitudes is incalculable.

THE EXPERIMENTAL KNOWLEDGE OF CHRIST

Thomas Boston (1676-1732)

"That I may know him..." - (Philippians 3:10)

Part 2

I will give evidence that experimental religion is very rare; point out some causes of it; show how it may be obtained; and press you to seek after it by some considerations.

First, I am to give evidences that experimental religion is very rare in our day.

1. The little relish that men have of the Word either preached or read. Experience makes the Word savoury; hence David says 'I rejoice at thy Word, as one that findeth great spoil,' Psalm 119:162. How many are there to whom the Word is tasteless as the white of an egg? Their fancy may be tickled by the discovery of something which they knew not before: but, alas! they have no inward sensation of the thing wrapped up in the Words of truth.

2. The little knowledge of the Word by experience. The best commentary on the ills of the heart is the Word; and the best commentary on the Word is experience. These reflect light one upon another. The experimental Christian reads his heart in the Word; he gets it opened and anatomised there, Hebrews 4:12,13. It is the looking-glass wherein he sees it. And he understands the

Word by experience, John 2:17 and 7:16. The doctrine of truth is according to godliness, and godliness, in the practice of it, makes truth shine the more into the soul.

3. The little precise and nice walking there is among professors, Ephesians 5:14. Christians should walk circumspectly; and it is the native effect of experimental religion, Isaiah 38:15. And the reason is plain: The experimental Christian finds how a wrong step will provoke the Spirit to depart, and how communion with God cannot be kept up in a loose and irregular way, Psalm 66:18. He sees how small a thing exposeth to the dint of the threatening; and that the way of getting the promise told out to him, is the way of tender walking, which counts no sin little. But, alas! for that miserable latitude that prevails in the walk of the generation, who take such a woeful liberty in their words and actions, as we may say with the prophet, Micah 7:1, 2, "Woe is me! for I am as when they have gathered the summer-fruits, as the grape-gleanings of the vintage: there is no cluster to eat: my soul desired the first-ripe fruit. The good man is perished out of the earth: and there is none upright among men: they all lie in wait for blood: they hunt every man his brother with a net."

4. The little advantage religion has by the conferences of professors. People may go into many companies ere they get one from whence they may come forth with a heart more inflamed with love to God and Christ, and the practice of godliness, because they can meet with few like him who said, "Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what he hath done for my soul" Psalm 66:16. Alas! there is little of heaven in the converse of Christians at this day; which says there is but little of it in their hearts. We have sat down on time's things; and as for the matters of another world, we have little relish of them. A philosopher bade one speak, that he might see him, Colossians 3:16.

5. Note the general security that prevails among all ranks, though we never saw the day wherein it was more unseasonable. Did experimental religion prevail, we would be waiting on the Lord in the way of His judgments, as the church did, Isaiah 26:8,20. God help us! Scotland's stroke seems to be walking in the dark, with feet of wool, that we will never hear the sound of, till we feel its iron hands. It is very like some fearful surprise is abiding us. The dispensations of our day are in their own nature rousing dispensations; but we are not at all awakened by them, more than we were when there was not a pin

in our tabernacle loosed. There are different opinions and practices in these matters; but whose heads soever are right, we think the hearts of all parties are wrong. And among all our unhappy differences, we have a more unhappy agreement in a spirit of slumber that has seized all together. And what shall be the end of these things?

Secondly, I shall point out some of the causes of the scarcity of experimental religion.

1. The Lord has a controversy with our mother, and therefore has withdrawn, and it fares the worse with the children. She was some time Hephzibah, and her land Beulah; but now her gold is become dross, and her wine mixed with water. She has forgotten her husband, and has been gadding after other lovers. She hath cast herself into a loathsome disease; her kindly heat and warmth is gone; anything of it that is left has struck out to the outward parts, leaving a key-cold heart within. And, by all appearance, she will not be cured, till blood be let of her.

2. People's spiritual senses are dulled with the luscious sweets of a present world. Farms and merchandise take away people's appetites for the marriage-supper, Matthew 22:4, 5. The devil makes birdlime of the things of the world to catch professors, that they find, when they would get upward, their feet stick in the mire. For many of us, I trow, when our worldly incomes were less, our spiritual incomes were more. Or, if the world go against people, their spirits are so embittered, that they find no sweetness at all in religion.

3. Religion is not made people's business, but just a by-hand work. Men are like the mole, whose abode is in the earth; and though sometimes it come above ground, it hastes in again to its hole, to be in its element. They will say their prayers indeed, evening and morning; but for walking with God in the interval of duties, they know nothing about it. Their religion is over when duties are over. They are like a man that takes physic indeed, but he just vomits it up again when he has got it, giving it no time to work, Genesis 6:9. Religion's chance-customers will never grow rich by it.

4. People's not holding hand to any attainment they make in religion, like the slothful man, not roasting 'that which he took in hunting,' Proverbs 12:27. They

are, it may be, at some pains to earn something in religion, but they put it in a bag with holes. Sometimes they are in a fair way to gain experience of religion; they get some taste of it but then they do not follow on, Hosea 6:3. The spark is kindled, but they let it go out; they do not feed it, and presently they have a cold coal to blow again.

5. Formality in religion, when people content themselves with outward worship, doing the work, but make it not their business to worship God in the spirit; by faith in Him, love, dependence, fear, hope, patience, &c. It is these and the like graces that bring in the experimental knowledge of Christ and religion into the soul. These are they that get forward to God, even to His throne. And duties without them are useless and vain, like liquor that has lost all the spirits.

Thirdly, I come to shew, how we may become experimental Christians.

1. Let us labour to be Christians indeed, and lay the foundation well in a serious and sincere closing with Jesus Christ. That is to say, let us, under a conviction of the reality and necessity of religion, give away and consecrate ourselves to the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us forsake the world for him, and look on ourselves as men bound to another world, under the conduct of the Captain of the Lord's hosts. And while we go through it with him, let us resolve to go lightly along, and not dip, Canticles 4:8. Let us forsake sin for him, and leave these husks to feed upon himself, for the manna will not fall till the Egyptian provision be done. And men need not think that the dainties of heaven will be brought to the table, where the soul is sitting at dust which is the serpent's meat. Labour to know them no more, not to seek your satisfaction from them, and ye shall know Christ.

2. Receive the truths of the Word by faith. If you would be experimental Christians, let the Word dwell in you richly in all wisdom and spiritual understanding. Hear it, and read it attentively, and with application; meditate on it; let it be your constant companion and bosom-oracle, to which you may always resort for direction, caution, and encouragement. And ye will soon find the commandment is a light, and that by it ye are warned, and that the promises have a sweet accomplishment, in the way of duty, in the experience of the Christian. Labour to get the divine faith of the Word. O, Sirs! it is not easy

to believe scripture-truths, Luke 24:25. Admit the conviction; look to the Lord for grace to believe, and keep up the struggle with unbelief.

3. Be diligent observers of your own way, the way of your heart and life. A man that lets his heart run at random, and does not review what passes there, can never be an experimental Christian. But every serious review of the heart would give you a new experimental confirmation of scripture-truths. There are two great depths that the experimental Christian wades much in, viz. the depths of wickedness in the heart, and the depth of perfection and fulness in Christ. Be much in self-examination.

4. Be careful observers of providence; the providence of God towards the church, and towards yourselves in particular, Psalm 107:43. Providence is a river that brings down the rich ore of experiences, which are to be gathered by Christian observation. The Bible is the Word that God preaches to the world; and providence is the application of the doctrine. In the Bible, the Word is brought to our ears, and in providence it is set before our eyes; though most of us are blind as moles, and see it not; but the experimental Christian doth see.

5. Lay it down for a conclusion, that religion is a thing that lies inwardly, and that it is quite another thing than a parcel of external performances; that it is a conforming of the soul to the image of Christ, by a close application to him, and a real participation of his Spirit, and virtue of his blood. And therefore seek that, and seek it on till ye find his truth comes not into your heart in Word only, but in power, gradually killing sin and self, and conforming you more to his image. And go not to duties as one that is only to hear or speak, but to feel or taste. And when your hand is once in, that ye begin to taste how gracious the Lord is, hold hand to it, and ye shall find his going forth prepared as the morning.

Fourthly, I conclude with some considerations to stir you up to this exercise:

1. Experimental religion is a sort of heaven on earth. Heaven is the eternal feeling of that goodness which is in God the chief good. It is his eternal pouring out of his goodness into the souls of his people, making them drink of those

rivers which they heard were at his right hand. Now, ye may begin it here with tasting the Word of life. That will make great delight, as the full enjoyment makes perfect joy there.

2. There are none who being capable of that enjoyment on earth, that get the first taste of it in heaven. No; they all begin it here, John 17:3. For God first gives men a taste of Christian experience, and then they desire the full enjoyment of it, and they get it in heaven. And this is the reasonable way with the rational creature. Whosoever tastes not here, shall not drink above.

3. The experimental Christian has the counterpart of the Bible in his breast, though imperfect. He has things old and new to bring out of his treasure, that answer to scripture doctrines and promises, as the copy to the original. The experimental Christian is 'a walking Bible'. He has a body of divinity formed of experiences, which is an excellent sort of learning, a thousand times preferable to all the raw unfelt notions of noisy professors, that are like the sounding brass and tinkling cymbal.

4. The experimental Christian is fit to sail to heaven, whatever wind be blowing; for he has both sail and ballast. He has experienced of the goodness and faithfulness of God, and of the sanctifying power of truth; that is sail that will carry him through in all storms; and he has experience of the corruption of his own nature, the deceit of his own heart, and of his pitiful weakness; and that will be ballast to him. For want of these in time of trial, few get through.

(1) It is very hard, without experience of religion, to stand in a time when the proud contemners of God seem to be most happy: when the sun shines bright on the way of wickedness and apostasy from God, and nothing but clouds and darkness appear in the way of holiness, Malachi 3:15,16. It is strange if those who never felt more sweetness in religion than in the world, do not at such a time turn their back on it altogether: but the experimental Christian will not do so: for 'the righteous shall hold on his way, and he that hath clean hands shall be stronger and stronger,' Job 17:9.

(2) When the night of error overtakes a church, and errors like locusts swarm abroad, how hard is it then to stand without experience! 2 Thessalonians 2:10. Where truth sinks not into the heart, but floats in the head, it makes

itching ears, to which novelties have easy access. They to whom old truths are unsavoury, lie a prey to new notions. And hence it has come to pass, that many noted professors have been carried away in such time. But he that has tasted of the power of truth, will say from his experience, "The old is better", Luke 5:39.

- (3) When divisions enter into a church, it is hard to keep right without experimental religion. Division is a great plague from the Lord, a stain on the beauty of the church, and a dreadful snare to men. When church-builders are like Babel-builders, how can the work thrive? It turns some quite off from all religion; while they see one going one way, and another, another way, they know not whom to follow, and they cast off all together. Others, whose religion was never so deep as the bottom of their hearts; exhaust the whole of their vigour on the controverted points, and so they become dead in the vitals of godliness. So that, unless people be experimental Christians, and exercised to godliness too in the time, having the ballast I spoke of before, they will run into terrible excess of selfishness, judging not only practices, but hearts: a very unchristian employment!
- (4) When great men, and good men are falling, how hard is it to stand, unless men have a witness to the truth from within? God, in his holy providence, for the further trial of men permits the fall of men of name for gifts and piety: and when these fall, readily they fall not alone, but as mighty oaks break down others about them, unless they be well rooted and grounded. And therefore they will never bring their religion to a good account, whose religion is only to do as others do.
- (5) Lastly, when it comes to hard and sharp personal persecution, especially to resisting unto blood. When extreme hardships, even death itself, are laid in the balance with an unfelt religion, it is hard to think how one should stand who has had no experience of the power of it. Should God give us up into the hands of a bloody antichristian enemy, it would be hard for them that have not been sealed by the Spirit, to refuse the mark of the beast.

Finally, I shall give more particular directions towards attaining experimental religion.

1. Fix your eyes on the particular evils of your heart and life, and ply closely the reformation of them by the Spirit. Alas! What are we doing in the way of mortification of sin? Experimental religion is a dying to sin, by virtue of our union with Christ. What use have we for Christ, if not to save us from our sins, Matthew 1:21. But the use many make of Christ is to save them and their sins. They will drink, swear, lie, cheat, and do unjustly still, and they will call these infirmities, or very little things, that need not disturb a man; and they will lick themselves whole with their believing; and on a new temptation just go back again to them. Sirs, this is to make Christ the minister of sin, and to sin because grace abounds. The running the round between swearing and confessing, will make men fall down at length into the pit, whence they will never rise again, Proverbs 29:1. If Christ cure thee not of thy disease, thou wilt never get life by him. Therefore, I say, ply reformation of heart and life closely. It will not be wishing that will do it; ye must put your hand to the work. It will cost mourning groans under the weight of sin, believing looks, and vigorous endeavours against it. Is there a thing that is your weak side? Pray remember thy soul is at stake; if it overcome thee, thy soul is gone; and if ever thou see heaven, thou must get above it, Matthew 5:29 and Revelation 3:21. O mind that passage, Mark 10:21. 'One thing thou lackest,' &c. Look to thy spots in the glass of the law, and quickly set about purging them. Thou hast, may be, a carnal worldly heart: fall on to get it spiritual and heavenly; an ill tongue, get it bridled; or an offensive carriage, get it mended.

2. Continue at the work, for the victory is not got but by degrees. The interruptions that take place in our plying the work of religion, make it still the more difficult. The miserable halts we make in the exercise of godliness, do but weaken us, and give the enemy more time to recruit. And they that cannot digest the making religion their business, are not fit for heaven. Heaven is an eternal triumph; how can they be capable of it then that make it not their business to fight, or that are always overcome, instead of being overcomers? It is a rest, therefore it presupposes a labour; not so much the toil of business in the world, for the most carnal have as much of that as professors, but a rest from labour against sin.

3. Take often notice what progress ye are making. Consider with yourselves, Have I got any more victory over my passions, my lusts, and my prevailing iniquity? Is there a cubit added to my spiritual stature? Am I going backward or forward? Sirs, people that are at pains with a farm, they count their profit, to see whether they be winners or losers: if anything has been mismanaged to their loss, they endeavour to mend it the next time; and if they find they are gainers, they are encouraged to redouble their pains. But, alas, what pains men are at about religion, is bestowed on it as if they cared not whether they prospered or not; and therefore they have no experience.

4. Look after the profit of duties. We should never hear a sermon, but should inquire, when we have come from it, Now, what have I made of this? Where did it touch me? What evil of my heart has it discovered? What influence has it had on me to fit me more for my journey and work? Sermons are not easy to some of you, that are far off from the place of public worship: ye would think it a great deal to go one mile, or two, three, four, or five miles in vain, in other cases. Look after your prayers, as the Psalmist did, Psalm 5:3. Ye would think it much if ye were to ask a request of your neighbour, and yet get no answer, or a refusal. O why then do ye not consider how your prayers are accepted by the prayer-hearing God? I assure you, if ye would fall upon this way, ye would soon find the good of it.

5. Converse with experimental Christians about experimental religion. There is a wonderful diffidence that professors have in one another at this day, Matthew 24:12. I verily believe this would be a good way to cure it, if those that have any experience of religion would modestly bring it forth to the edification of others. There is nothing that more endears Christians one to another than this. It is an unchristian-like thing in professors to despise converse about practical godliness and Christian experience. And there is more of the wisdom of the serpent than the harmlessness of the dove, in people's locking up in their own breasts all their sense of practical godliness, when it might be brought forth to the glory of God, and the good of others. I believe this way has been the cause of so much jealousy, suspicion, and division among professors; and has run out all Christian conference into vain jangling about the controversies of the time.

6. Be very nice as to the point of sin and duty, Psalm 133:2. Sudden resolutions in matters which will allow deliberation, are often to be suspected. Sometimes

the matter of sin and duty is of that nature, that there is no time to deliberate; all that can be done is, to look to the Lord for immediate clearness, and the Christian shall have it, Proverbs 4:12. 'When thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble.' Compare Matthew 10:19. 'But when they deliver you up, take no thought how or what ye shall speak, for it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak.' Sometimes the Christian may have time to deliberate, and then God's ordinary way is to clear men step by step, Proverbs 4:12. 'When thou goest thy steps shall not be straightened.' Say not, the way is plain at first glance in this case; for the Spirit of God bids thee ponder the path of thy feet,' Proverbs 4:26. If a way be such as our own heart at the very first inclines to, I say it ought the rather to be narrowly examined, seeing in scripture-language the way of our own heart is of no good name. And suppose the inclination of the man's heart does really fall upon the right side in this case, yet this is no Christian resolution, but a stumbling on the right way, which God will never accept. Therefore, men that would act as Christians in the point of sin and duty, should lay aside prejudices, trample their inclinations under foot, lay the matter before the Lord, and themselves open to conviction there, as a piece of clean paper, on which God may write what he sees meet, pondering all things with a holy jealousy over their own hearts, lest they be biased by their own inclinations and preconceived opinions. I am sure much of God is to be found in this.

7. Acknowledge God more in your temporal concerns, Proverbs 3:6. Are we Christians? let us depend on God for all things in this life and the other. We are directed to pray about them, the promises are about them, and therefore we should wait on God for them. Many a sweet experience have the saints got in temporal things, when they have been helped to lay them before the Lord, and leave them there without anxiety, in the use of the means.

Lastly, have a precise respect to all the commands of God, and be truly strict in your lives; that is, deal with men as believing God's eye is upon you, and with God as if the eyes of men were upon you. Never look on the authority of the multitude as sufficient to make that no fault, which will not abide strict examination by the Word of God. Let the command of God prevail with you; and whatsoever liberty ye may take for ought that men can say or do to you, let that be a sufficient restraint. Thus, ye may attain to experimental religion.

Concluded

EPILOGUE

In the refurbishment of our old cottage, it was necessary to take up one of the rotten timber-floors to discover the cause and extent of the visible rot. Nearly all of the original blacksmith-made nails were rusty, so the floor came up quite easily. This exposed what are 350-year old oak-joists which were laid directly on the damp earth. Bearing in mind that the cottage has a river not too far away, the water-table level would never be too far below, so these oak-beams had been exposed to the damp from the time when the cottage was built. Little wonder, then, that they appeared to be in a very poor state!

The first inspection of the timber seemed to verify this, for some crumbling parts came off in my hand, only fit, it seemed, for the skip and disposal. I took a saw to one of these timbers, and at first it seemed easy, the first couple of sawing actions of an inch depth went easily, then it became much harder and harder until, after five minutes, the wood was cut through. What a revelation that the core of the oak was as good as the day it was laid, hard, solid, in perfect condition, and reusable.

A biblical text came to my mind, " man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart" (1 Samuel 16 :7)

What of the Lord's people who have believing loved-ones who have been unwell for a very long time, perhaps unable to communicate? Some of them have had to sit at hospital or hospice beds looking on at those so dearly loved, disfigured and in great pain. Others have held the hand of a weak frail dear one as the time of their departure draws near. The Scripture says in Philippians 4:7, that "the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ."

We cannot see our loved ones' hearts but God does and we may be sure that He looks after them and keeps them.in peace. The inside core is good because God is looking after them. It is well with their souls.

Steve Storey