

Leaning on Man's own Understanding.

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It is not in the Church of Rome only, nor in the superstitions of heathenism only, that the precept, Lean not on thine own understanding, has been interpreted to mean, Lean on some one else's understanding, and that it has been stigmatized as insane pride of the human intellect if men presume to prove all things, and are unable to accept what others propound to them as correct interpretations of the Divine will. I may as well state here at once, that I believe that the words of the first text I have read, when considered together with their context, will be found to have no connection with the use that is sometimes made of them. When we want to know what is meant by wisdom and understanding in the Book of Proverbs, we can find no better commentary than the saying in the Book of Job—"The fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to depart from evil, that is understanding;" or in the words of the Book of Proverbs itself—"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the holy is understanding." The wise man of the Book of Proverbs is he who walks in the ways of Holiness, who "understands the fear of the Lord, and finds the knowledge of God." If a man fancies that he can make a better calculation for his own happiness than by obedience to God's law, he miserably deceives himself—his wisdom is foolishness. Appearances may be in his favour, "But though a sinner do evil an hundred times and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God which fear before him. But it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days, which are as a shadow, because he feareth not before God." This, then, is what the writer of this part of the Book of Proverbs means to say in the words of the text. Be not deceived by any suggestions of the human heart which would lead you to fancy that God's precepts are not wise, and that you can find happiness in any ways which are not the ways of holiness. "Be not wise in thine own eyes, fear the Lord, and depart from evil." The paths of sin may seem to you smooth and easy; His way may appear rough and thorny; but walk in the way that He hath marked out for you, and have faith to be assured that that will be the way which leadeth to life. "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart, and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths." The words of the text, then, contain no injunction to us to put out the candle of the Lord within us, that reason which supplies the light whereby we must walk, but only an injunction to us to hold fast the best conclusion which true wisdom furnishes, namely, the conviction that it must be a vain search to look for happiness in any ways but His.

To come back, then, to the truths which I commenced by discussing—in matters of speculative belief, and still more in practical matters, we have no option but in some form or another to be guided by our own understanding. If we are acting as rational beings, and not as mere straws blown by the wind, whatever line we embrace, we must be led by some reasons for embracing it, which commend themselves to us as good. We may not have balanced for ourselves arguments for and against, but may have acquiesced in the decision of some authority, but then our understanding must approve the wisdom of submitting to that authority. At some stage or other a decision of our judgment must be the foundation of our action. Those who consider themselves safe in following the guidance of a Church which they deem infallible, must still, if they are rational beings, have had some reason for adopting the opinion that their Church is infallible, and if that belief cannot be justified, then there is no certainty of anything they have received on her authority. It is quite true that the great bulk of our beliefs has not been attained by any process of independent reasoning. We catch our beliefs from others; a great part in childhood

from our parents and instructors; more from our equals when we grow up. But however obtained, our beliefs are bound when challenged to justify themselves to our reason. If they fail to do this, their perishing is but a question of time.

I have seen an attempt made to show that the Roman Catholic is the only form of Christian faith which is likely to survive the struggle with modern unbelief. Sentence of failure was passed on all Protestant attempts to defend their faith by argument. As it is now the favourite method of making converts to Romanism to scare them into the bosom of the true Church by the fear of scepticism, so Roman Catholic controversialists seem to look with a kind of satisfaction on the efforts of sceptical writers whom they believe to be doing their work, and are apt to rate at the very highest the success which such writers are able to achieve. Their own Church they can boast does not commit the fundamental error of endeavouring to justify herself by argument. She contents herself with demanding submission, and calling on men blindly to follow her guidance. They are to wait for proofs until they are in her bosom, or rather they are to continue their allegiance until they can prove that she is leading them wrong. And as, when once they have yielded themselves, they are taught that it is a sin to doubt or question anything she propounds to them, I am not prepared to deny that if the arguments on the side of unbelief are really the strongest, this may be the best way for keeping men as long as possible from yielding assent to them. But, after all, it is little to gain for any denomination of Christians only the boon of the Cyclops to be devoured last. It is difficult, indeed, to believe even in the good faith of an advocate who builds his hopes for the success of his cause on the pertinacity with which he can evade a trial. I can understand a man refusing to listen to imputations on the character of a friend in whom he has perfect confidence. But if he gave as a reason for refusing to listen, that he was assured that the result of any examination would certainly be unfavorable, and that all who ventured to bring his friend's character to the test would be sure to think ill of him, how could men believe that he himself seriously thought well of him?

In sum, then, however little right we have so presumptuously to trust to our understanding as to dogmatize, as if there were no chance of our committing a mistake, the understanding God has given us is a trust, the responsibility of which we cannot shake off, and for refusing to use which we should certainly be guilty. I have joined together in what I have said our liability to go wrong in speculative and in practical matters, because of the light one throws on the other. If we think it hard to have to use our own judgment in forming beliefs which, if erroneous, may have consequences beyond the grave, let us consider how God deals with us in respect to the affairs of this life; how He disciplines us by throwing on us the responsibility of making decisions which may have the most serious results on our earthly happiness; how He does not save us from this responsibility, even when the knowledge necessary to a correct decision is wanting to us; yet how, out of all our errors, He works out the ultimate good of those who put their trust in Him.

Popular Services.

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Men's minds are being agitated by the many theories of restless and self-satisfied reformers, who, forsaking the old paths, and forgetful of the sanctification which they have gained by the observance of orderly rites and ceremonies, and of the life-giving Sacraments ordained by Christ, are inventing new and more rapid means of grace—means of grace more in harmony with our modern fast habits of life—destitute alike of the authority by which we English Churchmen are bound—that of the Book of Common Prayer—and generally of Church tradition.

Let us consider: Is the Christian religion meant to be popular in the common acception of that term? Was its Founder, who went about doing

good to the souls and bodies of men—taking nothing, giving everything—Himself in any enduring sense popular? Did He frame His discourses always to the level of those to whom they were addressed, or seek to acquire popularity by condescending appeals to the tastes and caprices of those among whom He labored? Did He not constantly rather seek to *elevate* man's moral nature? Was not the popular cry at the close of His most patient, loving and self-sacrificing ministry—"Not this man, but Barabbas"?

The popular voice is a fitful one. It represents the world, and will always represent it, as we are warned by our Master and King: "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated Me before it hated you." "If ye were of the world, the world would love its own; but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you." The popular voice is the voice of the natural man, and so is not the voice of God. It is loud-sounding, pretentious, discordant. God's work is, as a rule, carried on silently and secretly. He is commonly found in the still, small voice, rather than in the fire and the earthquake.

Any condescension to the worldly spirit and cry of what is now, so far as my knowledge goes, understood by the term *Popular Services*, cannot be made until the Church has lost all true tone and sense of her Divine mission, and of her Lord's relationship to the evil and anti-Christian policy and spirit against which she is set up as a Divine witness. In these days, and amongst ourselves, men's minds seem to be singularly set upon excitements, amusements, and pleasures, and so it is beginning to be argued that our very medicines must be gilded. The Cross, in the sense in which the Church has understood it, must consequently be withdrawn. Men will not have it.

Churches, consecrated to God's service, visible embodiments of the Divine, are rapidly becoming places of amusement, in which the holding of what are termed "Services of Song," "Flower Services," &c., are destroying traditional faith and reverence. Self-forgetfulness and self-control are becoming extinct virtues. The popular spirit—i.e. the spirit of the natural man, is welcomed, as if we had discovered in it a new force for the conversion of the world, unknown to former ages of the Church from Pentecost downwards.

"Vanity Fair," with which Bunyan's Christian Pilgrims found nothing in common, is fast becoming, in our days, a Church institution. His Pilgrims, "clothed in raiment diverse from any that traded in that Fair," were greatly gazed upon. And as with their apparel, so also with their speech. Bunyan tells us it was "much wondered at," for few could understand what they said, as they naturally spoke the language of the Heavenly City to which they were journeying, while they who kept the Fair were men of the world, who owned Beelzebub for king.

Now, are not some of us much disposed to be "Hail fellow well met" with such as these traders, and to think that we have much to learn from them, and must, in order to direct modern zeal into a properly authorised channel, accommodate our teaching and practice to the likings of these times? Surely such as so think must forget that ours is the religion of a Divine Founder, in Whose ministry there was no tone of accommodation to His times—no appeal to popularity—and in Whom, and in Whose Apostles there was no condescension to the follies, the vagaries, and the weaknesses of the people, and that the teaching and practice of the primitive Christians were in full accord with that of the old prophets—God's earlier voice to His people. Was the chosen nation ever enticed back to keep the law and serve God, in His ordered way, by any permission of popular and amusing services, when the prescribed ones had failed to command their obedience? The word "Service" was then understood. It was something rendered to God, taking its tone from God, and commanding, therefore, obedience and respect. It was not a faithless compromise between God and the world, between man's wishes and desires and God's ordinances and requirements. It was an objective act, not something done for the sake of popular excitement and amusement. (To be concluded.)