

Our Contributors.

FOR DOMINION PRESBYTERIAN.

The Power and Promise of Christian Experience.

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(Phil. 1: 6.)

This is an age of criticism and controversy. Intelligent men are stirred by an eager questioning spirit which investigates the foundations of every accepted belief. Everywhere we hear the din of debate and the noise of conflict. The most sacred subjects are handled with fearless freedom, the oldest beliefs are pushed aside to make way for the newest theories, the conceptions of God which have been cherished for centuries are sometimes ridiculed as the lingering remnants of a foolish superstition, creeds and definite statements of faith are denounced as tending rather to fetter the intellect than inspire the heart.

While there is probably less of coarse vulgar infidelity and thoughtful men cherish a respect for religion, at the same time as a distrust of dogma, the spirit of bold restless discussion seeks to manifest its presence in all quarters within or without the church. At times the very fierceness of the conflict produces weariness and begets a longing for some final external authority but that is only a passing phase, a temporary lull in the everlasting battle. The greatest difficulty to devout people is caused by the action of the critical spirit within the church as it subjects the ancient documents to severe examination and propounds revolutionary views concerning the history of our religion. Some regard this activity as a sign of health; others treat it as a symptom of disease. At present we cannot debate this issue but must simply emphasise the feeling of uncertainty that is begotten in the minds of men who make no pretension to critical sharpness or philosophic culture. They lose confidence in religion and think that it is impossible to be confident regarding anything spiritual. The clouds of dust which rise from scenes of theological strife cause some to lose their way and to doubt whether there is any reliable pathway. When we drift into this irritating uncertainty, a confident tone in others seems to be intolerable dogmatism.

And yet it remains true that in relation to vital matters, uncertainty is a weakness and confidence gives strength. We are not fed by doubts and difficulties but by truths that we see clearly and love intensely. A man can only be calm, strong and influential in proportion as he possesses truth upon which he can rest in patient hope. There is no faltering hesitancy in the apostle's tone. These words uttered in the face of Jewish tradition and Greek speculation come with true originality and tremendous power, "Being confident of this very thing that He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it unto the day of Jesus Christ." The speaker is not dealing directly with historic facts or intellectual conceptions but with spiritual experience. He asserts strongly the fact of real intercourse between God and man. This specific work of God within the soul is to him the highest manifestation of the divine.

There is nothing that we need to realize more in the stress of conflict than this, the reality of religious experience, the possibility

of pure communion between man and God. Different scientific theories as to the nature of light do not lead us to doubt the existence of the sun, different opinions as to the methods of cultivation do not hinder us from enjoying the fruits of the earth; in the same way we ought to see that important as they are, many of these intellectual discussions do not touch the central fact of redemption. While we see many things through a glass darkly, we may be sure of this, that God worketh in us and that by the power of his love manifest in Jesus we are delivered from the dominion of prejudice and passion.

Intellectual activity is essential to the health of the Christian church, the truth will survive the ordeal of the fiercest discussion. But mere argument and speculation separated from faith and devotion are full of danger for the individual man. The man who possesses the religious life which quickens all his power of thought, feeling and will is also the man best fitted to freedom in all forms of investigation. Confident faith must not be confounded with narrow dogmatism, both the narrowness and the dogmatism are signs rather of scepticism, or of a half faith that is ill at ease.

I. This experience is divine in its origin.

The truth which Paul declares here he repeats in the next chapter where he tells us that it is God that worketh in us. Thus he claims a divine origin for the experience of the humblest soul; he says that our religious life is a spark from the heavenly fire, our devotion is the result of a wondrous inspiration. By Christian experience we mean the struggles with sin, the longings after purity, the feeling of calm confidence in God, the personal attachment to the Lord Jesus. These are the marks of true discipleship, they are not the fancies of fanatics, they are not the morbid production of an overheated imagination, they come to us from the eternal God through our Lord Jesus Christ. The believer knows that his life is changed and glorified by the vision of the Christ. Those who laugh at this experience as an unreal thing, as feeble mysticism which will not stand the searching light of science, simply show the shallowness of a scepticism which seeks to ignore one of the mightiest powers that the world has ever known. All the great prophets and apostles, leaders and heroes, claim that their power to face a hard unbelieving world comes from the indwelling spirit of God. If we could imagine the history of man to be bereft of all that has been created by the fire of religious enthusiasm and by the inspiration of Christian hope it would present a very dismal picture. Only that which comes from God can lift men heavenward; human selfishness, mean and sordid, must gravitate towards hell.

It is enough to believe that God has inspired angels and sent them with messages of peace to men, that He put burning words in the mouths of prophets, that He has revealed the highest truth through the medium of His Son; we must cherish a living faith in the present dispensation of the Holy Spirit. Why should we stumble here? The sun pours its

rich refreshing rays on the grandest tree and the meanest plant, the common air ministers to the lowly peasant as well as to the proud prince, the same Lord is rich unto all who call upon Him, "I am poor and needy but the Lord thinketh upon me." Two closely related facts, the poverty of man and the thoughtfulness of God.

II. The inwardness of the experience.

It is not in the realm of the senses, it does not merely play upon the surface, it is a power working upon the inmost life controlling the very centre of thought and feeling. The ceremonialism of the ritualist and the argumentation of the rationalist are small and insufficient, they are only parts of the living whole. This life must manifest itself in many ways, but this working of God, this divine process is the hidden source, the secret spring of noblest life. Now when so much is said about the social side of religion, and "the saving of the soul" is branded as spiritual selfishness, we must remember the mystic experience. He who is to bring religion to bear on social problems must solve the personal problem and learn the meaning of reconciliation to God through Christ.

Food must be received and assimilated in order to be transformed into flesh and blood; new knowledge must blend and harmonize with the whole life of the mind; so the power of love must work through the hidden nature before it can show its print in Christian character. The spreading branches of the lofty tree are dependent on the healthy roots which run widely underneath the soil, and so continuity of obedience, of consistency of outward action can only come from living influences that work from within.

III. This experience may seem small in its beginnings.

God gives us the beginning of the mighty river in the slender stream that comes rippling down the mountain side. He has hidden the gigantic oak in the tiny acorn, and He can bring a noble influential life out of a single fruitful moment of heavenward desire. The beginning may be quiet and unobserved but the work is steady and reliable. We cannot tell when God first begins to work in our hearts, we cannot look back and say on such a day God first began to bless us. We may chronicle the time when we first became conscious of divine ministry, when we first listened with heedful attention to the heavenly voice. There is no need for us to be anxious because our experience has not been of a startling, sensational character. Paul, Augustine, Luther, Bunyan, and many others can tell of masterful visions and clear conversion but they would be the last to demand that the Spirit should work always in the same way. The light of heaven may come into human life in various ways, sometimes it bursts through the stormy darkness and shows sensational signs; at other times appears with ostentatious gentleness. The important thing is not the mode but the reality. Our dissatisfaction with self, our longing after forgiveness, our desire for purity and peace. These beginnings of life are divinely inspired, they have in them the promise of perfection and heaven. A conversion that is abrupt and decided is still only a beginning; hope for our future not admiration for our past is always the proper attitude. God is ever calling us forward, and we