

Our Contributors.

Are the Earlier or the Later Stages of the Christian Life the More Difficult?

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My attention has been drawn to this question by a very able tract lately written by Dr. Newell Dwight Hillis. Anything that Dr. Hillis writes is worthy of attention. He is a man whose genius cannot very well be defined. If I were to try to sum him up in a word I would say that above all things he is brilliant. Every page he writes sparkles with illustrations, and sometimes these are almost too dazzling; for an excess of light dazzles as well as illuminates, as the sun obscures more than he reveals when he blots out the stars. Dr. Hillis has such a store of illustrations, derived from history, biography, and science, all ready to his hand, that even a dull subject in his hands becomes interesting.

I have read nothing of this gifted author which, on the whole, pleases me more than the tract referred to. It is entitled, "What is it to be a Christian?" In this tract there is more sound philosophy, and less illustration, than usual. In a short compass the author gives us really a philosophy of Christianity of greater value than many large and more pretentious works. I think this tract must clear the way of many earnest enquirers who are seeking to know what genuine Christianity really is. While the stress is laid upon life rather than doctrine, it is no mere morality that is insisted on, but the very Christ spirit and the Christ life. Such sentences as these are golden: "The disciples of Christ had no idea about an inspired Bible because the New Testament was not written. They knew nothing about a creed, for theology had not yet taken its rise. They were not faithful to a church, for the church was not yet organized; but they were faithful to Christ as a Person. Therefore, they were Christians." "Fortunately, it is not necessary to know in order to be. Life goes before knowledge." "Christianity simply represents an extension of the laws of God into the soul's higher realm." "When a traveller has turned toward the South we must not suppose he has reached that land of tropic fruits and flowers. Perhaps he has taken but one step toward a summer land that is a thousand miles away. Nevertheless, he has started for that glorious clime."

There is one paragraph, however, in this notable tract that made me pause. I am not going directly to criticize it; I am not so very sure of my ground to do so; but I may present an alternative view to that of Dr. Hillis, and invite others to judge as to which is the correct one. I shall first give the words in which Dr. Hillis develops his theory. He says:

"In the realms of conscience and character man must work out his own salvation through ceaseless struggling, toiling long, hard and patiently. And just in proportion as he goes toward excellence does the work become difficult. The law of creation is, that the higher one climbs, the more intricate and difficult the duties. It is easy to control the ox, and guide the beast across the field. The horse is higher in the scale, and his government asks for a higher degree

of skill in guidance. Wind represents a more powerful agent, and happy the sailor who can always guide his boat midst the swirling storms. Steam can scald as well as push, and only experts dare use it. Highest of all is electricity. And he who controls that subtle, invisible, almost omnipotent force, must be an expert indeed. There are five thousand men that can guide the ox where there is one man who can guide the electric current. Not otherwise is it in the Christian life. It may be easy to subdue the forces that make for gluttony and drunkenness and theft; but it is not easy to meet storm with calm, to meet ingratitude with forgiveness, to meet slander and hatred with forbearance and pity. The higher one climbs toward the level of Jesus Christ, the more difficult the task."

Now I may be wrong, but I have had just the contrary idea. I have had the idea that the beginnings of the Christian life are the most difficult. Is not the main difficulty to make a start? A fair start once made, is it not easier to go on? I think this law will hold in most other things. Take any study, or any trade, or any profession, or any special line of conduct that is new to us, or irksome, or difficult, and are not the beginnings the hardest? Does not ease come with use, and experience, and habit? What is difficult at first becomes comparatively easy later on. To proceed along the same line on which we have once started would surely seem less difficult than to start on some new untrodden path. And if this is so in the usual affairs of life I think it is not less, but perhaps more so, in practical Christianity. For here we enter on a set of habits and duties not only foreign to our natural bias, but contrary to it; and it might surely be expected that the initial difficulties would be the hardest to surmount. So much for the general principle.

But then look at the special difficulties which Dr. Hillis cites as initial ones, and which he deems so easy to overcome. "It may be easy," he says, "to subdue the forces that make for gluttony and drunkenness and theft." This was what pulled me up sharp. Easy to subdue the animal passions! This is new light to me. It may be easy, perhaps, for Dr. Hillis, but surely, with his vivid imagination he might realize that it may not be easy for other men. Peter evidently did not think it easy even for the saints to whom he wrote. He describes them as "elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit"; yet he thinks it necessary to warn them against the "fleshly lusts that war against the soul." As a matter of fact, there are men so constituted that they are in danger of going down on the animal side of their nature all their life long. Yes, though they be eminent Christians, and maintain an honorable profession through several decades, they are never very far from the precipice. I have in mind a notable public man at whom one had but to look to know that the animal nature in him was far from being conquered. Happily for him, however, the spiritual nature was even more highly developed; but there was war in that man between the animal and the spiritual while he lived. I knew another man very well who maintained an honorable Christian name through a long life, but who

went down in infamy on the animal side at last. This animal force, in my view, has to be reckoned with until life's close. It is not an initial danger merely, but one that follows some men till life's end. After some high levels of character are reached there may be collapse here. Witness Noah; witness Lot; witness David. I think, therefore, it is not safe, nor agreeable with experience, to assume generally that the coarser animal passions are soon or easily overcome, as Dr. Hillis seems to imply. Nor have these dangers to be considered as limited to the early stages of Christian life: they have to be reckoned with all the way.

Then, further, I think Dr. Hillis' illustrations of his view are not in his usual, convincing style. Because the ox is more easily controlled than the horse, and the horse more easily than the wind, and the wind more easily than steam, and steam more easily than electricity. Dr. Hillis seems to conclude that the coarser kinds of sins, like the horse and ox, are easier controlled than the finer kinds of sins, like steam and electricity. But I doubt if the point is well taken. I fear Dr. Hillis falls here into the mistake of taking an illustration as a proof. A man who uses illustrations so copiously and usually so happily, is, perhaps, liable to such mistake. But as a matter of fact, an illustration can prove nothing. The most it can do is to illuminate some truth already ascertained. And as I do not see that experience or Scripture supports Dr. Hillis' view, I think his illustration, beautiful though it be, is out of place. In my judgment, he commits the twofold mistake of placing the animal passions in the initial stages of the Christian life, and in supposing that these passions are comparatively easy to overcome.

Speaking of illustrations, I may use one here of my own, in reference to the view I have been trying to uphold; that is, that the first stages of the Christian life are the most difficult. I noticed the other day a railway man trying to move a loaded railway wagon. He pushed with all his might, but the wagon would not move. Then a third man came with a stick which he applied as a lever to the wheel of the wagon. By the united efforts of the three men the wagon at length moved, though very slowly. But the moment it began to move the third man dropped it, and the two not only kept it going, but quickly increased its speed. Very soon the second man dropped it, and then the first man kept it going with very slight effort. And I thought that was a picture of the Christian life. How slow we are to start. How inert and heavy to begin the Christian race. But once started, we gain momentum, and that which before seemed impossible becomes easy.

Now I have not in these remarks intended to be very pronounced in the view I have tried to set forth as an alternative to that of Dr. Hillis. I would like if others would say where they think the truth really lies. For this is no barren theory, but a matter of practical, spiritual importance.

Whichever of the two views may predominate, one thing must not be lost sight of, and that is, that it is divine grace alone that can give us the victory over sin. No merely psychological or ethical theory, or both combined, will cover the ground. It is grace alone that can really make us conquerors, whether in the earlier or more advanced stages of Christian experience. This grace can be given in such measure as to meet all demands, Paul said, "I can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth me." Isaiah said, "They that wait upon the Lord