

How Much Theology?

BY REV. S. E. WISHART.

The enemy of souls is very artful. When some poor sinner begins to turn his face towards God and cry out under the burden of sin, the arch deceiver gets up a side diversion. A letter from a friend who has recently been brought to a discovery of his lost condition, and who is under deep conviction for sin, brings to light the wiles of the devil. This gentleman finds nothing in himself but sin and guilt. He looks with horror upon his past life. It has been an unbroken rebellion against God. His habit of sin has almost driven him to despair. He realizes that unless he can find forgiveness in Christ he is doomed. Death, moral death, is upon him. Nothing short of a spiritual resurrection can deliver him from this horrible self, this body of death. All this, and much more he sees clearly, and feels deeply.

Unfortunately for him, he had no early religious training. He was not nurtured in the things of God, but gradually took up with the too popular conception that while there is much truth in the Bible, there are many things that are incredible, and therefore cannot be received. Now, in the hour of his sore need, he finds these long-cherished views, this habit of discounting the Word of God, is flaunted in his face. When he would believe, unbelief is thrust upon him. He is ready to sink under the appalling weight of personal guilt. He would lay hold of Christ, but his old enemy comes with an array of the old difficulties. The miraculous conception of Christ, other supernatural events, and the great doctrine of God's sovereignty, rise up to torment him. If they could now take in the whole system of theology he could and would rest on Christ. He makes the mistake of trying to adjust all difficulties before committing himself to the Saviour.

Satan is trying to blind his eyes to the precious truth that Christ is the way, the truth and the life, that he is the light of the world, that he can make darkness light, rough places smooth—that it is all light in the Lord, that all the promises are yea and amen with him.

While it is a blessed thing to have been well instructed in the doctrines of the Bible, to have known the Scriptures from a child, so that the Spirit of God may show us the things of Christ, and soon end the contest, yet it is important to understand that a knowledge of all theology is not essential to salvation. Two things in the system of Bible truth we must know. Ignorance of these two truths is death.

First: we must know that we are lost sinners, in and of ourselves. The soul that has not made that discovery is doomed. No power can save him. The door is shut against him. He has shut it himself. Such was the calamity that the Jerusalem sinners brought upon themselves. Christ walked, taught and wrought among them. He did such works as no other man ever did, in attestation of his Messiahship. But the scribes and Pharisees were not sinners, in their own estimation. They were whole, did not need a physician. They thanked God that they were not as other men. Hence all the accumulated evidence of Christ's love and power only angered them. As Christ retired from the city he stopped, sat down and gazed with inexpressible compassion upon the doomed city. Through his tears he exclaimed, "O, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets and stonest them that are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not." They had not discovered that they were sinners, and until such discovery was made the Saviour of the world could not help them. They repulsed his teaching and his person. To them he was only a meddling pretender. He would but they would not, and therefore they could not be helped. Hence salvation is not possible to any soul that has not discovered its lost condition. This discovery is essential in order to receive the great salvation.

The second truth necessary to salvation is that the Lord Jesus Christ is my personal Saviour. That is very much more than the discovery that he is a Saviour—he must be to me my Saviour if I am to be made partaker of the divine nature. But what about the difficulties, the mysteries in the Word? Never mind the mysteries or difficulties. They do not save. Doctrines, hard or easy, do not save. Doctrines point to Christ who saves. Therefore they are important, at least two of them—that I am a lost sinner, and Christ is my personal Saviour. When the soul accepts these two truths, believes them with the heart, he accepts Christ and is saved. Then begins the process of teaching and receiving other important truths, for all truth is important. Regeneration is the first and most important thing, and it is not dependent on our knowing all theology, but the two things above specified. With the new birth, with Christ as our teacher, for the soul is supposed to have taken him, we can proceed with our education. We can say with Nicodemus: "We know thou art a teacher come from God, for no man can do these miracles that thou doest except God be with him."—Herald and Presbyterian.

Like an echo from a ruined castle, prayer is an echo from the ruined human soul of the sweet promise of God.—Arnot.

Tightening the Girdles.

BY REV. THEODORE L. CUYLER.

The ancients, in Bible-lands, were accustomed to wear loose garments, and when any strenuous effort was required, they gathered the folds, and bound a girdle around their waist. The Apostle Peter—who had once girded his fisherman's tunic in order to swim ashore to his Master—exhorts his fellow-Christians to "gird up the loins of your mind." This exhortation is timely now; it contains one of the core principles of an effective useful Christian life.

We need to be reminded that Jesus Christ did not suffer for us, nor did the Holy Spirit convert us, just to make us comfortable. Getting to heaven is not the chief reason for becoming a Christian. The chief object is to do Christ's will in all things, and obedience to Jesus is the first law of Christianity. The phrase, "girding the loins," implies readiness for duty. When the children of Israel were to leave Egypt they were commanded to stand with girded loins, and with staves in their hands, ready to be off at a moment's notice. Paul's first inquiry when he was converted was "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?" and at the finish of his grand career of obedience, he exclaims, "Now I am ready to be offered." Eagerness for the fight marks the true patriot soldier; eagerness for the run made the successful Olympian racer; eagerness to do Christ's will even at sharp personal sacrifice is the trait of the most ready-hearted Christians. We ministers soon discover who are the minute-men in our churches; and we are not fit to prepare a sermon when it is regarded as a drudgery; our girdle has broken.

Another idea suggested by the Apostle's phrase is the compacting of all our powers upon the work we have in hand. Consecration requires concentration. Paul's "this one thing I do" tightened his girdles, and kept him from frittering away his life on trifles. Pericles knew only one street in Athens—the street that led from his own house to the Executive Chamber. Spurgeon used to tell me that he never went to dinner parties or public entertainments, and never would lecture for money; he did nothing but study and preach, preach, preach until he had no longer breath to sound his Gospel trumpet. At this season of the year the feeble sun-rays may be so focused by a burning-glass as to set wood on fire! That is what we need now in our churches a revival means focusing the faith and zeal of church-members. Under the concentrating power of the love of Jesus some people of small means and moderate talents, become powerful Christians. The current phrase of a man's "pulling himself together," describes exactly what I mean; there are not a few church-members who have gone to pieces for want of this girdle of spiritual concentration.

Loins girding also implies a wholesome idea of restraint. Laxity in doctrine, in social life and in church-life are quite too prevalent in these days. Loose thinking often leads to loose living. The very word "religion" signifies something that "binds"—something that both holds us together and binds us to God. If we are Christians we cannot act just as we like. The people who clamor for liberty to think as they please and do as they please, and who scout at all Bible-restraints as a bondage are the very ones who drift away into vagabondage. It is not a good sign when either a minister or a church-member begins to loosen his girdle. He is preparing to shirk hard duties, or unpopular positions, or else to drop off into indolent slumbers.

Too many people are falling all apart, and going to pieces from looseness of principles. Weakness becomes wickedness. All backslidings in the church start from loosening the hold on Christ. Conscience loosens its grip. The very garments which the professed Christian wears become entangled in all manner of worldly habits, and practices until he can make no headway toward the "goal of his high calling."

There is a loud call for "revivals." They must begin in the church, with a prompt response to the roll-call of duty. Wherefore let us all gird up the loins of our souls and "be sober." The service of our crucified Lord is not child's play; and co-operating with the Holy Spirit in the winning of souls is serious business—albeit it is the happiest of all occupations. There is joy in hard, honest work—joy in slaying a sin and in saving a soul, joy in pressing forward to the crown. Those who would fain go to heaven in what Samuel Rutherford calls a "close covered chariot" may not gain admission at the gate after all; if they do, they will be ashamed to look Peter and Paul in the face. Then let our lamps be trimmed afresh! Eternity is just behind the door! "Blessed are those servants whom the Lord when He cometh shall find watching; He shall gird Himself, and make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth to serve them."—Evangelist.

The Hand of Providence in our Mistakes.

The hand of providence in our successes, our accomplishments, our deliverances, is easily recognized by our quickened or grateful perceptions; but less easily and readily, as a rule, do we acknowledge the same kind and wise hand in our mistakes. Yet in most lives the latter equal, if not exceed, the former in the experiences of the passing years.

Our motives are so curiously mixed, our foresight is so short, and our limitations are necessarily so many, that we are constantly blundering, now turning in this or that direction when another would be the better one to take; now remaining in a place when we ought to leave it, and changing a place when we ought to remain in it, until, as we draw near the sunset, we are fain to bewail our lack of judgment, and to wish in vain we had our lives to live over again.

After the event it is quite plain to us that we should have acted in another way, and we see clearly where we were wrong and what would have been the wiser course of action. But at the time our eyes were holden and we did not perceive the indications plainly.

Especially when our mistakes affect the lives of others, as when parents by a certain decision modify or entirely change the circumstances and future position of children, or as when, at a turn in the road, our stepping to this side or that arrests our fortunes and gives us the downward push instead of the upward, we are apt to cast the blame wholly on our fatuity and to leave providence quite outside the reckoning.

And, taking their view, it is not strange if we grow cynical and morbid, eat our bread in bitterness, and look with envious wonder on the comrade who has outstripped us in the march.

If, however, we accept the sweet and comforting doctrine that our whole lives, from the beginning to the ending, are under God's sovereign control; that while we are free to choose, still, for reasons infinitely kind and far-reaching as eternity, the love that outlasts time and sense permits our errors, we shall escape the danger of complaint or weak chagrin.

True, on some occasions we did act on impulse, and with childish precipitancy, and on others we suffered meretricious reasoning to mislead us, but all the while we were God's dear children, and he had not let us go, and there was some need in our nature which even he could not have supplied unless the discipline of life had made us aware of it.

There are characters which cannot be developed except by contract with pain and disappointment. There are strong and noble souls which arrive at their full estate only wrestling against wind and tide. There are exceptional temperaments which would never find God unless driven to his arms by stress of sorrow and desolation of defeat.—Selected.

Fitted for Service by Experience.

The "Sweet singer of Israel" never did so pathetically and emphatically bewail the corruption of human nature as in his penitential psalms; never with such ardor did he make the mercy of God his only plea; never did he more fully and completely acknowledge and feel that unless God forgave and upheld him, he must fall and perish. The disciple Peter, before his denial, was confident in his own strength, and felt inclined to exalt himself above his brethren; but by and by, when his carnal confidence in himself and his own strength were forever destroyed, he perpetually exhorted believers to watchfulness, holy fear and dependence.

Every Christian with the inspired Paul when contemplating the "body of death," finds a precious blessedness in the grace of the gospel; but when, after falls, the voice of pardon and forgiveness is heard, the heart swells with adoring wonder at the goodness and mercy shown to so unworthy a rebel. Can the praise of a seraph vied with the flaming love of a Peter, when he recalls the tender look of Jesus which called him back to his duty, and gave him the assurance of the Master's forgiveness? How tuneless is the harp of Gabriel when compared with that of David, when, contemplating his fall and his forgiveness, he celebrates the grace and the love of the merciful Lord! They were thus taught the depth of the iniquity of sin, and rendered humble and dependent.

Having been made thus painfully to feel their weakness, with what gratitude did they look to their heavenly Father! The remembrance of the bitter anguish of soul, the recollection of the "wormwood and the gall," inspire them with additional fear and hatred of sin, and make them more studious to mortify the flesh. They tremble at the remembrance of the disease they have already felt, and, humiliated by the recollection of the sin which had defiled them, oppose all iniquity, and, looking to the very root of transgression, hate its source.

They are thus, by the wonderful providence of God, fitted for service. "When thou art converted," says Christ to Peter, after predicting his fall, "strengthen thy brethren." By the bitter experience of the power of temptation and sin Peter could admonish others against them. It should be remembered that it is Peter who particularly warns those to whom he writes not to "deny the Lord that bought them." By the blessed experience of pardoning love, they are fitted to direct the trembling, wounded, distressed, sin-sick soul to the fountain of grace. Because they have seen and tasted that the Lord is good, and have themselves found mercy, they can feel the spirit of meekness and compassion to others, "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye that are spiritual restore such an one in the spirit of meekness, considering thyself lest thou also be tempted."—Christian Standard.

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