

THE RELATION OF SOUNDNESS IN THE FAITH TO SPIRITUALITY IN THE LIFE

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SPIRITUALITY in the life is the greatest purpose which religion is intended to promote in man. And any system which fails in this, breaks down at the most critical point. For man, the sinner, is not only to be saved—rescued from the dreadful situation to which sin has brought him—but he is also to be sanctified, fitted for that glorious position to which the Lord Jesus will advance all who come unto God by Him. And the pure Gospel is fitted to accomplish this. The Saviour's own prayer implies that, when He said, "Sanctify them through Thy truth, Thy word is truth." Thus, our minds are to be turned to-day to a very practical question—the relation and connection which are found to exist, between soundness in the faith and spirituality in the life. No more interesting subject could be offered—and it needs to be handled in a very loving spirit. Spirituality in the life should of itself eliminate all bitterness, all narrowness, all captiousness in the discussion of such a subject; and I shall endeavour carefully to guard against everything hollow in argument and hard in expression, in saying what I have to say to my brethren on a matter which we all are most anxious to grasp and master.

Many an earnest minister of Christ is mourning, wondering over the want of spirituality in his people. Many a servant of Christ is grieving over the want of spirituality in his own soul. There is coldness, deadness, rigidity; and the servant of God wishes to find warmth, life, freshness, activity in himself; and others. And it may be, by God's good hand upon us, that coming together as brethren, we may strike out some thought which may explain and enable us to deal with the practical causes out of which the mischief springs.

Now, I think I see a relation between soundness in the faith and spirituality in the life.

I.—*In the matter of the confession of sin.* And here let me express conviction that men who take very different views from myself upon this matter have a real desire and a strong determination to promote spirituality. I think they must be disappointed, and believe that they are mistaken; but their motives must not be questioned if ever candid inquiry is to be given to this most solemn question. Let us be outspoken, but open-hearted, faithful to the verge of the Revelation platform; but tender, to very tearfulness, towards men who are really endeavouring to contend against sin. But suppose a man to believe that it is the purpose and plan of God, that the confession of sin is to be made through a creature—the Church aggregate in its members, or represented by its ministers—that man, however sincere in this conviction, is wrong as to his view of the Gospel system, and his errors have an influence against the spirituality which he wishes to promote. Because, when the sinner is brought down into the presence of his fellow sinners he must lose, and he does lose much of the awful and solemn realities of sin itself. Lift him up as high as you can, put him distinctly and without an escape under the all-searching eye of God, take him out of the littlenesses of man, and leave him before the majesty, and holiness, and mercifulness of his Maker; and so you will make him understand, that to confess must be to be thoroughly contrite, really ashamed and alarmed, absolutely and entirely sincere in the feeling and in the expression of his horror and hatred concerning sin.

Take that same sinner to a man fallible and frail as himself, a man who can read only the externals of look and language, things which may express but also may conceal emotion, a man who may interpret the sin according to its offence against man more than its enormity against God, and you

lower every part of his exercise of soul. The penitent may become prostrated and chilled to the centre of his conscience, he may be trampled upon in his own notion by the knowledge that a fellow man has seen the defilement and the deformity of his spiritual self. But this is not spirituality. The tendency in such a heart is to close, not to open. You are forging letters such as God has never named. And every effort made to remedy the known defects of any human search does but make the matter worse. The probe is poisoned, because it has come from contact with some spirit still more diseased; and the very questions of the confessor do but suggest the very corruption which he may in all honesty be desiring to prevent. The history of the confession is a record of retrogression in all ages and departments of the Church. And the rationale of the confessional is the explanation that it is and it must be so. Some bodies of Christian men have said, Confess your experiences; others have said, Confess your sins to the Church. Our own wiser and more scriptural exhortation is, "Let a man examine himself." The sound faith leads the sinner into the presence of the God of love leaves him thus without any creature between man and majesty, puts the spirit within before the spirit above, and the result is that the real questions are raised with which God means to deal,—the real answers are given which man has no power to keep back,—religion is lifted up out of the shams and subterfuges amongst which it tries to hide, and it becomes that earnest, honest thing of the heart and conscience,—that bright and transparent thing of truth and trustfulness, which God means it to be in every human soul into which His Grace has put it.

With all your care, you cannot make artificial light do the work of the light from heaven—and with all your efforts you will have failure and disappointment, because your carnal processes do not and cannot secure the spiritual results you look for. But, if you stand in the presence of men, full in the light of God's revealed word, and there point that the Great Spirit in Heaven is searching the precious spirit of man on earth—you may look for God's blessing on your words of truth and find that God's power has indeed been put forth—and men who once were carnal, grovelling, serving divers lusts and passions will be found full of the Spirit—alive in their soul—acquainted with the worship which is in spirit and in truth. It is damaging to the soul—dangerous to the Church—and distressing to all who know anything about the life of God in the soul of man,—when men are drawing poor sinners to the tribunal of a man, when they ought to be standing in the presence chamber of God, to confess only, always, everything to Him. And, I am persuaded that if ever, in this highly favoured land, in our greatly honoured Church, there should come in the system of an expected or an enforced confession unto men, the immediate effect will be a drooping and a barrenness over all the garden; and the ultimate result would come of a deadening and disgusting blight, which would make our Church as much a shame as it has been a glory in Christendom. You may squeeze out corruption under the pressure of confession to man: but you can only distil the essences and the aromatics of pure spiritual sorrow and service, when you put the soul under subtler influence which comes from direct contact and communion with God.

The relation for which this paper is meant to contend is seen also:—

II.—*In the matter of Communion with Christ.* Some men seem to hold communion only with the *man* Christ Jesus. It is all humanity, his beautiful life—his loving heart—his noble faithfulness—his diligent devotedness to doing good. But you will not get spirituality out of that. You may get a dreamy sentimentality under which you will really find the dregs and lees of a carnal selfish life—as when a man draws beautiful pictures of home as it may be conceived to be, and then lets his wife and children know by a bitter experience what a dreamer's home-life is. You may get a dead and dreary melancholy; as when a man has endeavoured to copy the Christly character, and has thrown down his pencil in disgust and despair, because his imitation has been so wretchedly out of proportion and out of place. You may get a harsh, stern asceticism, in which a man prides himself on some self-denial, which means but little, and then, Pharisee-like, begins to rail at the Publican, who really has an honest and an anxious heart. But spirituality comes out of knowledge of our Spiritual Head,—the God-man Christ Jesus. Therefore, it is out of such subjects as the atoning work—pardon through the blood—life because of the death—salvation, had, enjoyed, known—that the Spirit, the soul of man is lifted up into a higher region of love, and praise, and worship. All mere

rationalistic views and teachings must fail, do fail, ever have failed in the matter, of that higher, holier life which is implied in what is here called spirituality.

Some men seem to hold communion with Christ mainly in sacraments, and symbols, and ceremonies; and these will be also found to fail in the thing they may earnestly seek to reach—spirituality of life and heart. The very genius of the Gospel is simplicity—great facts and truths simply appropriated and taken home by a living faith which the Holy Ghost has put within.

There is, for instance, beautiful simplicity in the fact that the Lord Jesus has ascended up with His human body, and is at the right hand of the Majesty in the Heavens. My mind can grasp that idea and use it to enjoyment and edification. It lifts thought and heart heavenwards. The fleshly eye may not follow; but the eye of faith does find Jesus there—a forerunner, a friend, a firm hand-hold to which I can cling, be the shakings of my foot-hold on earthly things what they may. But if I am made to believe that the body of the Lord is upon a material table, in dependence upon words spoken by a man, my spiritual instincts are outraged, my upward thoughts are checked as if some frost had blighted them. I come down into the acquiescence of a devotee—the unquestioning obedience of a dependent upon another's mind and will. This may be called devotion, but it is not spirituality. And we see it in practical effect. How comes it that a man is most careful to receive fasting—as if the condition of his body were most carefully to be considered;—and yet will receive after some midnight revelry, in which the condition of the soul can have had but small attention? Is it not because the sacramental dogma has tended more to the idea of a fleshly than of a soul intercourse between him and Christ? It is the same thing which accounts for the awe-stricken look, and the prostrate form, and the scrupulously gathered crumb, and the carefully arranged hands—materialism everywhere. There ought to be the radiant, uplifted, heaven-reflecting eye, the happy, hopeful, thankful face—the spirit, soul, breathing out of the every sense, as if the man were more of heaven than of earth as his soul is lifted up in conscious communion with his Lord. The multiplication of forms has always attended a deterioration of worship. The living religion has the freshness of life, which is its own ornament; but the religion in its grave-clothes needs the artificial adornments of flowers and furbishings, which are there because they cover decay and call away our thoughts from the death that lies below. You may work up excitement, superstition, party spirit, fear, fanaticism, by the sacramental and sacerdotal system of a grand ceremonial, and services which show much of man; but spirituality is a thing of far subtler character, and it will escape in the midst of all these coarser things, and leave the Church and the conscience alike cold and dark and dull. This system is growing up amongst us with an alarming rapidity; but it is a thing of deadly growth. We must not encourage our brethren to tamper with it, or use soft and weak words about it. It is no new thing in our Church. Two centuries ago it came up as it is coming up now. It wrought out results which are matters of history. No age so immoral, so spiritually cold, can be pointed out, as that which followed, after that former endeavour to bring back ritualism into our Reformed Church. We are warned, we are instructed by the past, and if we would be kind to our neighbours, who are busy in this dangerous enterprise—if we would be true to our own souls and the souls of our people, over which this blight seems ready to come—if we would be faithful to God, who has put us in trust of the pure Gospel, in order that we should hand it down in its integrity to the ages which are yet to come, we must be wise enough, bold enough to say, that spirituality is the great effect which we have to seek, and that it cannot follow from any system which puts man or ordinances between the Saviour and the soul.

My third observation as to the relation between sound doctrine and spirituality of life is made:—

III.—*In the matter of fellowship with the Holy Ghost.* The apostle Paul has connected the two things together where he says, “through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth.” And the fact will easily come out on careful examination. Now spirituality of mind is the direct result of the power of the Holy Ghost upon the soul. It is only an evidence and fruit of the life which the Spirit has given. The unconverted man has no spirituality. “The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, for they are spiritually

discerned." Now take the case of a man who teaches that life in the soul is always given when baptism by water has been administered. Such a man is assuming as reality what may be most unreal. He is talking about life, and looking for its fruits, while no life has been given. If it be not true that there is the Spirit in that baptized person; it cannot be true that there is the spirituality in him. You may threaten, or persuade, terrify or coax such a man to be outwardly correct and ecclesiastically submissive; but the very first principle of spirituality has yet to be imparted to him. Mistaken views which these give as to the communication of the Holy Ghost must be very closely associated with disappointed hopes as to communion with the Spirit. A man who has right views about the divine person of the Holy Ghost may yet assume that He works in external ordinances and sacraments in a way which neither Scripture nor experience will justify—and he will be tempted to put a meaning upon spirituality level with the low results which his system of doctrines compels him to sink to—and the higher real character of that moral change of heart and soul which the Holy Ghost works in the man that He quickens will be overlooked, and assigned only as the mark of the favoured few, and not to be as the very essence and nature of the life of God in the soul of man.

But another type of error comes up where the distinct personality and divine nature of the Holy Ghost are not accepted or understood. If we believe that the Holy Ghost is only an influence—speak of the third person as "it" and not as "He"—if we hold that inspiration concerning truth is alike in quality though not in quantity in the poet as in the prophet—if we think that regeneration means the cultivation of the better emotions and instincts of man's natural heart—then we are grieving, dishonouring the Spirit—and deluding and misrepresenting the sinner himself. Is spirituality to be taken as the "love of God"—realized love from God or returned love to God; we are to remember "the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us." Is it to be taken as holy consecration to the Lord; we, "through the Spirit, do mortify the deeds of the flesh." "Ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you." The truth is, that one great chapter in the history of the soul and of salvation work has been left out in the reckonings of some men. And we need some earnest, and immediate, and direct dealings with the whole crop of errors and mischiefs which has grown up of late years, not in one branch, but in many, of the outward professing Church, from erroneous or inadequate teachings about the Deity and the special operations of the Holy Ghost. The Holy Spirit in the giving of life—in the revelation of Jesus—in the creation of prayer—in the imparting of comfort—in the direction of effort—in the sole communication of real spiritual success, must be more honoured, more enjoyed, more respected, more praised. Full of the Holy Ghost—walking in the Spirit—led of the Spirit—living in the Spirit: such are the holy ideas which the word of God has given about a real sanctification and a true spirituality of heart, and thought, and life. "Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit which are His." This is the dispensation of the Spirit—the Holy Ghost has come and not gone back—and there will be no spirituality in a soul or in a church, when this truth is not known and loved.

IV.—*In the question of the standard by which Spirituality is measured.* That may be a world's standard, or a Church's standard, or a standard which God himself has given. The world's standard has risen or fallen according as vital religion has advanced or retro-graded in the world; but it has never yet come up to the level on which the child of God must stand in his very first coming out of the mire and clay, to take his place upon the rock that the Lord may order his goings. If there be respectability, morality, orthodoxy, observance of times, forms, ordinances of worship—if there be amiability, honour, usefulness, charitableness, the world's standard has nothing to record against the professor who so serves Christ.

The Church standard in its purest days has been in harmony and coincidence with all that God requires. But it has happened, and it may happen again, that to be devoted to a system may be mistaken for devotion to truth. If, for instance, submission to authority in the Church, zeal in its defence, liberality in its support, high position in its services, constant attendance on its ordinances

shall become more an end than a means of life, the Church life has come down from the things which be of God to the things which be of man. There is much reason to apprehend that there is very much miscalculation in this direction in this our own day. Adornment of fabrics, multiplication of services, elevation of all that is connected with truth, and skill, and order and propriety, may not be concurrent with higher and holier worship. And Church defence, Church extension, Church reform, may all go on, and yet the Church life and influence be low. We want more humility of soul, more contact in our living soul with the living Saviour, more communication of grace and strength by the Holy Ghost. These things must be in our thoughts, in our hearts, in our prayers, in our talk, in our life, and the spirituality in act will rise with the spirituality of idea, expectation and desire. Hence is the importance of that standard which God has himself given as to what a Christian is to be. Now that standard goes deeper than men may think. It will not stand on the debris of many former failures; but it is to be erected on the bare rock, from which all creature righteousness has been removed. It begins with Jesus accepted, made our own by a living and true faith. It goes below the surface and deals with the hidden man of the heart. It tests not only acts but motives, not only practices but principles. It is God's own trial what each man really is in God's sight.

Then it rises far higher than many men are prepared to acknowledge. It begins with a desire to please God out of that deep gratitude which follows, when pardon of sin has been realized and peace of conscience felt. It rises into a pleasure in serving God, when His law is found to be holy, and just, and good, and His service is known to be perfect freedom. It advances into a desire to be like God—when holiness and happiness are discovered to be of one kindred and concomitant growth. It continues to ascend in a yearning desire to be with God—will parallel with God's word, heart—filled with God's presence, hopes gilded with God's promises, Faith with her wing feathers in full growth, standing on the upper height to which the hand of Jesus has guided and lifted her up, ready to take heavenly flight, to be absorbed in the facts and realities of the upper world, and the eternal existence in which Saint and Saviour are to be face to face. The barometer of Gospel truth will be found to be in harmony with the thermometer of Gospel holiness. And soundness in the faith will be found to have a relationship to spirituality in the life, such as a right reckoning has to a true course, and a sound heart has to a healthy circulation. Raise the right standard—insist on the higher tone—reckon upon all the opposition—realize all the grace and strength, and you will find the courage, the morale, the might, the majesty, the principles of the Christian army to be more conspicuous and encouraging day by day.