

Personal Religion

BY
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The world to-day contains many different religions. There is Mohammedanism, centering around the person of Mohammed ; there is Buddhism, centering around the person of Buddha ; there is Confucius, centering around the person of Confucius ; and there is Christianity, centering around the person of Jesus Christ. Very often, in these modern days, all these religions are placed very much on the same level. They are frequently regarded as having a common origin, and as making their several contributions to the race of mankind. How often Jesus Christ is regarded as being on a more or less equal footing with the great men of other religions. There are many to-day who would heartily accord with the words of Emerson :

“One was born in a manger,
And one by Avon’s stream ;
One grew up by the bank of Nile,
And one in the Academe.”

We, however, as Christians, have no part in such comparative religion. We, of course, do not deny for a moment that there are elements of truth in all the religions which we have mentioned ; but, having granted this, we hold strongly and unswervingly that Christianity is the final and absolute religion—the only religion which can save the soul—and that Jesus Christ, the centre of this religion, is absolutely unique and beyond compare.

When we speak of religion, then, we refer exclusively to the Christian religion, and when we speak of personal religion we refer to that Christian religion as it bears on the individual soul. Personal religion is **my** religion—the religion which I, as a distinct being,

profess, and to which I give expression in my daily life and conduct. If we require a definition, we may perhaps define it as—my relationship to Christ and the experiences arising out of that relationship.

No one can overestimate the importance of personal religion in these modern days. It is important, when we consider the fact that many to-day are content with the mere externals of religion, with outward forms and ceremonies, which are diametrically opposed to real heart religion ; and it is also important when we consider the fact that men are liable to emphasise the social side of religion rather than the personal side. Now, the social side certainly needs to be emphasised, but not at the expense of the personal side. The order should be— first of all, personal religion, then social religion.

Now, this subject of personal religion is a very wide one, and might be treated from many different aspects. We purpose, however, dealing in cursory fashion with a few outstanding factors which are implied in it.

I.—Personal religion implies personal conversion, or, to give it its more theological term, personal regeneration.

This is the basis of all true personal religion. "Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."—"Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven." Apart from this new birth, the new heart, the new nature, there is no such thing as personal religion. The daughter of Dr. Duncan, of Edinburgh once told her father that she had heard a fine sermon on the text, "This is the will of your father, even your sanctification," and Dr. Duncan immediately asked "Did it begin with regeneration?" That question

went right to the heart of the matter, for, apart from personal regeneration, personal sanctification is an utter impossibility.

The necessity of regeneration is, as we are well aware, universal. All men are sinners, and all need to be born again if they are to be truly religious. Nicodemus, the learned Pharisee, needed it, and the woman of Samaria, the scarlet, crimson sinner, needed it. The staunchest and most loyal Covenanter needs it, and the down-and-out drunkard in the slums of the city needs it. "There is no difference, for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." One may be down deeper in the mire than another, but all are down in the pit of sin, and all need to be lifted up by divine grace.

This work of regeneration belongs to God, and to Him alone. Man has no part in it whatever—how could he when he is spiritually dead. The active agent is the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Trinity. In carrying out the work, the Spirit uses means, and especially does He use His own Word. By it He convicts of sin, enlightens the mind in the knowledge of Christ, renews the will, and thus persuades and enables the sinner to embrace Christ freely offered in the Gospel.

This work of the Spirit is mysterious ; we cannot understand it. "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, and canst not tell whence it cometh and whither it goeth : so is everyone that is born of the Spirit." We may, however, know of its existence by its effects. "Thou hearest the sound thereof." One of the effects or evidences of regeneration is faith. "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God." Faith is distinctly personal and is one of the grand elements in personal religion. It is just personal trust in a personal Saviour, receiving and resting upon Christ alone for salvation. Another

evidence of regeneration is repentance. By this we do not mean mere remorse or sorrow for sin. Repentance is a turning from sin unto God. These two evidences of regeneration—faith and repentance—are inseparable ; we cannot have the one without the other. As Dr. Charles Hodge has said in his "Way of Life" : "Repentance is the act of a believer and faith is the act of a penitent. So that whoever believes, repents ; and whoever repents, believes." We see, therefore, the utter folly of those who say they have faith, and yet continue living in open sin. Those who make the assertion overlook the fact that faith and repentance always co-exist side by side.

And of course when we are enabled to repent and believe for the first time, that is not the be-all and end-all. The entire Christian life may be regarded as a life of repentance and faith, a life of turning from sin and looking to God.

II. Personal religion implies personal consecration.

Consecration is to be distinguished from conversion. As Dr. Chalmers has said : "In conversion God gives to me, in consecration I give to God."

The verb to consecrate occurs quite frequently in the Old Testament, meaning to set apart to a holy use. In this sense the Levites were consecrated to God's service, as also the various vessels in connection with the tabernacle. Sometimes persons consecrated themselves or someone dear and near to them, e.g., the Nazarites consecrated themselves to God, taking upon themselves certain vows of separation and abstinence ; and Hannah consecrated her son to the Lord.

In the New Testament the word consecrate very rarely occurs, but the idea conveyed by it pervades both the Gospels and the Epistles. We find it

especially manifest in such a verse as Rom. 12 : 1—
“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies
of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice,
holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable
service.” This has been fittingly called “the winning
call to entire consecration.”

Perhaps the main idea implied in consecration—as we use the term to-day—is that of absolute surrender. John Calvin’s seal and motto was an open hand holding out a burning heart, with the words engraved, “I give all” ; and that is the seal and motto of every truly consecrated person. Christ is not satisfied with a divided allegiance and with a mere corner of the heart. He is not content with a partial surrender ; He demands the surrender of all— body and soul—to His service.

The consecrated man realises that he is not his own, that all he has—his time, his talents, his opportunities—belongs to Christ. He looks upon himself as the absolute property of the Lord Who bought him and his whole life is lived in the light of that fact. And personal religion implies such consecration ; it implies the surrender of the will to the claims of Christ.

“Our wills are ours, we know not how ;
Our wills are ours to make them Thine.”

Friends, have we definitely dedicated our lives to the service of God ? Have we laid all upon the altar of consecration ? Have we entered into covenant relationship with our Creator, promising to endeavour to follow Him wholly and to own Him as our Master in all things ?

In the days of persecution in Scotland fifteen girls of Midlothian subscribed a covenant, part of which ran as follows :—“This is our covenant made

between the Lord and us with our whole hearts, to give up ourselves freely to Him without reserve, soul and body, to be His children, and Him to be our God and Father." Surely there is a fine example for us, as Covenanters, to follow. Consecration is just entering into covenant with God.

III. Personal religion implies personal confession. The word confession is used in different senses. We speak, e.g., of confession of Christ, meaning by this testimony for the Saviour. This is the duty of every believer. "Whosoever will confess Me before men," says Christ, "him will I confess before My Father which is in Heaven." More commonly however, we speak of confession of sin, meaning by this the acknowledgment of our sinful condition. This again is the duty of every believer. The believer, no matter how fully consecrated, never reaches a stage in this life at which he is morally perfect, and at which there is no necessity for confession.

There are, alas, to-day many professing Christians who seem to have lost the true sense of sin, which used to be such an outstanding characteristic of our forefathers. There are even some who would go so far as to hold a theory of "sinless perfection," and who believe that it is quite possible to attain such a degree of perfection in this life as to render confession of sin absolutely unnecessary. From such an attitude we strenuously dissent. We believe of course, in aiming at sinless perfection—we believe firmly in striving after holiness—but we believe also, and are sure, that perfect holiness will only be attained at the end of life's journey. The greatest of God's Saints have always had the deepest sense of sin; and indeed the nearer we are to Christ and the greater visions we have of His holiness, the more will we be constrained to cry: "Behold I am vile."

The tendency in these days is to treat sin more or less lightly, and so to pay little attention to personal confession. There is, it is true, a modern movement—the Oxford Group Movement—which lays great stress upon confession; but then its confession is public and sometimes leads to undesired results. There have been some who have attended Group meetings and who have testified that they there became acquainted with sins the existence of which they had never previously dreamt. We do not believe in public confession unless the public has been expressly injured by the sin confessed. Confession is to be made in the main to the person injured—though it is quite right and desirable to relieve the mind and to seek counsel and advice by private confession to one's pastor—and most often that Person injured is God Himself. "Gainst thee, thee only have I sinned." Those were the words of David on one occasion, when he had grievously sinned against his neighbour. His sin against God seemed far greater than his sin against man, and so to God he made personal confession as if God had been the only Person wronged. "If we confess our sins"—to God—"He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

IV. Personal religion implies personal communion. We cannot lay too much stress upon this aspect of personal religion. Indeed, we may go so far as to say that the essence of true religion is communion with God.

Now, when we speak of communion with God we are not thinking of public communion, such as we have in the House of God either on an ordinary Sabbath, or on a Communion Sabbath. Rather, we are thinking of private personal fellowship, such fellowship as each individual believer should daily have with the Father.

This Communion involves secret prayer. No one can over-emphasise the importance of the exercise. It is absolutely essential to the growth of the soul. Apart from it progress is impossible ; once it ceases, backsliding is sure to begin. Francis Ridley Havergal once said : "Were I asked the question 'What one thing do you suppose has most hindered the largest number of Christians, this day and this year, in their spiritual life and growth ?' I should reply, unhesitatingly, probably the temptation not to rise in time to put on their armour, as well as their dress before breakfast."

The greatest saints have been those who have paid most attention to prayer and honoured most the secret place. Our Lord Himself, although sinless, was much engaged in secret prayer, sometimes spending entire nights in earnest supplication with the Father. David prayed three times a day, and sometimes seven times. Daniel's custom was to pray three times every day. And, brethren, if we are to be strong Christians and to become a power for good in the community, we must find time for earnest prayer at least morning and evening. And of course, we should not confine our prayers to these stated times, or to a stated place. We should be so convinced of the abiding presence of God in all our daily activity that we should be ready at any moment to offer up ejaculatory petitions. We remember Nehemiah offered up such a petition in the midst of his work, whilst serving the King. "So I prayed to the Lord God of Heaven."

And then communion with God involves not only prayer, but also Bible study and meditation. The man who is personally religious will be a man of one Book, and that the Bible.

To-day we are much further advanced than our forefathers in every sphere—the literary sphere

being no exception. Of making of books there is no end. We have access to knowledge which was utterly beyond the reach of our ancestors. And yet there is perhaps one sense in which our ancestors were better off than we of the present generation. They had very few books, and so they were thorough masters of all they had ; they knew their Bible from cover to cover. To-day the temptation for us is to read books on the Bible instead of the Bible itself. This temptation certainly ought to be resisted if a man is to be truly religious. Every saint of God is a diligent student of the Word. He reads it daily and meditates upon what he has read ; and the words are sweet to his taste.

“O, how love I thy law ! it is
my study all the day.”

If we are to grow in grace we must be personally acquainted with God's Book of Truth. We must find time for reading it daily, and not only for reading, but also for meditation and application of the Word to our own souls. We should always endeavour to examine ourselves in the light of what God's Word teaches us. A Welsh woman was once asked : “Why, Mary, are you reading the Bible ?” and she immediately replied : “Yes, sir, and the Bible is reading me.” It is a good thing when the Bible reads us, as we read it, when it drives us to self-examination and provides food for our hungry souls. This will be especially so when we read and meditate upon the Psalms. They form the great devotional book of the Bible, and every need of the soul finds expression in their sublime phraseology.

Such, then, is the nature of personal communion. It involves prayer and Bible study. In the former we speak to God ; in the latter He speaks to us. Do we find joy in speaking ? Do we find like joy in listening ? Can we say with the spouse in the

Song of Solomon : "I sat down under His shadow with great delight and His fruit was sweet to my taste?" Blessed are those who find such joy and happiness in personal fellowship with the Master.

V. Personal religion implies personal co-operation with God in service. For the growth and nurture of the body there must be breath, food and activity, and for the growth and nurture of the soul there must be prayer, the reading of God's Word, and service. Perhaps it might be alleged that we are here leaving the personal aspect of religion, and dealing with the social aspect ; but I think that we are quite justified in bringing in service under personal religion, because the man who is personally religious must have something to do with social religion, and in doing that something he will be benefiting his own soul.

Communion and service go hand in hand ; we should not have the one without the other. There are some who stress communion in such a way as to disparage and neglect service, but this attitude does not find support in Scripture. "Wherefore criest thou unto Me," said the Lord to Moses on one occasion "speak unto the children of Israel that they go forward." The time for communion was past and the time for service had begun. There must be the "going in" and then the "going out" to find pasture—in to communion, out to service. Mary sat at Jesus' feet, but she also poured the ointment upon His head.

Now the term service is one of very wide meaning and application. It implies, for one thing, performing our daily task. Christ was serving God when He toiled at the carpenter's bench, and Paul was serving God when he was labouring at his tent-making. And it is possible for each one of us to be serving God in our daily work and occupation, provided that work

is honest and done "as to the Lord and not to men." We should each one be able to write over our workshop and upon all our tools the words ; "Holiness unto the Lord." There are some who think that there is a time for religion and another time for business ; but this is a sad mistake. The writer of the book of Ecclesiastes does not say that there is a time for religion and a time for no religion. Religion is for all time and should be expressed in the workshop as well as in the Church, on the ordinary days of the week as well as on the Sabbath.

Again service implies lending a hand to those in need, bearing another's burden, giving a cup of water to one of Christ's little ones. Personal religion must be practical religion, otherwise it is no religion at all. In the Epistle of James, which is one of the most practical books in the New Testament, we have a statement regarding religion : "If any man among you seem to be religious and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction and to keep himself unspotted from the world." That of course, does not purport to be a full definition of religion, but it clearly shows that religion must be practical.

Then, again, service implies soul-winning. We cannot lay too much emphasis upon the aspect of service. The man who has experienced the power of religion in his own soul will think of others who have not experienced it. Personal religion is not absolute egoism. The true Christian is not an egoist ; on the contrary he is essentially an altruist. He has a burning passion for souls and an earnest desire to be the means in God's hand for leading others to the Saviour whom he loves. It has been said of our Covenanting forefathers that "there quivered through them the passion to redeem," and if we are really

in Christ we shall be constrained by a like passion and we shall seek, by word and prayer and example to be the means of leading others into the fold. "He that winneth souls is wise." "They that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever."

VI. Personal religion implies, I believe, **personal conformity** to the principles of our Covenanting Church. I need not state these principles here. I believe that they are scriptural, and if strictly adhered to, will give the individual the greatest scope for growing in grace and spiritual attainment. The distinctive principles of our Church—even those dealing with national life—are closely related to personal religion. This is clearly shown in a paper given by the late Dr. Lynd at the Convention of Reformed Presbyterian Churches, held in Scotland in 1896. In this paper Dr. Lynd has three divisions. The first division is "that personal religion is necessary in order to bearing a public testimony for Christ Jesus the Lord as Head of the Church and Governor of the nations." Under this division Dr. Lynd refers to personal piety of those prominent in the Covenanting struggle and quotes part of the dying testimony of Donald Cargill: "I have followed holiness, I have taught truth, and I have been most in the main things; not that I thought the thing concerning our times little, but that I thought none could do anything to purpose in God's great and public matters till they were right in their own conditions." Our Covenanting forefathers were right in their own conditions before they thought of trying to set the nation right. Dr. Lynd's second division is "that personal religion tends to grow out into a public testimony for Christ the Lord of all." This is its natural expansion. The man who has enthroned Christ in his own life will naturally

desire to have Him enthroned in national life. Dr. Lynd's last division is "that the maintenance of the distinctive principles of the Reformed Presbyterian Church makes for the increase of personal religion." As we think of the headship of Christ over Church and nation, as we think of the glory of the enthroned Lamb, the deeper becomes our own penitence, the stronger our faith and holy affection, and the fuller our consecration.

We might conclude by asking ourselves a few personal questions bearing on the ground we have covered :—

(1). Have I been led to utter the cry What must I do to be saved, and have I, by the grace of God, stood at the foot of the cross and experienced the joy of forgiveness ?

(2). Have I surrendered myself to the Lord, laid all upon the altar of consecration ?

(3). Am I daily becoming more and more conscious of my sinfulness and of Christ's power to cleanse and does the language of confession find a prominent place in my prayers ?

(4). Have I personal communion with God daily in prayer and Bible study, and do I find real joy in such communion ?

(5). Am I co-operating with God in service ; am I doing my daily task to the glory of God, seeking to help others and endeavouring to point others to the Saviour ?

(6). Am I upholding the principles of the Church to which I belong ?

My religion is nothing if it is not personal.