

The Place of Conversion in Christian Experience.

ALL Evangelical Free Churchmen place conversion at the heart of Christian experience and make it the paramount aim of their preaching. Conversion has for them an importance it cannot have for Churches which are sacramentarian and established. Evangelical Free Churchmen stand for the principle that men are not born as members of the Church of Christ. To enter that Church a man must "be born again." Church membership is a matter of individual choice because the Church is a voluntary organisation. Evangelical Free Churchmen stand for a converted membership; and declare that no man has a right to membership in their Churches unless he has a Christian faith and conviction of his own. It is no accident of their history that has led them to give conversion so central a place in Christian experience; it is due to the inner logic of their principles, which, they are convinced, are grounded in the New Testament. Yet despite this attitude to which they are committed by their fundamental principles, the fact remains that the subject of conversion has of late fallen on evil days among them. Preachers do not preach to secure it with the assurance of an earlier generation. Members of Churches do not expect it to happen; and fewer people are seeking it for themselves with passionate longing. It may, therefore, be useful to inquire why this is so.

(1) The whole idea of conversion has been vulgarised by professional revivalists of the type of Billy Sunday and Mrs. Macpherson. The idea has got abroad that conversion is sectarian and even vulgar—something that no person of taste and refinement would dream of desiring for himself as of consummate importance. We can, I think, turn the edge of this argument if we remember that after all conversion is not something that occurs only among the less educated and in little Bethels. Investigation has shown that it occurs in all religions. There are plenty of cases of conversion, with valuable fruits for life and conduct, in all the great religions of the world. There are striking stories of genuine conversions in the annals of Hinduism, and Islam and even in early Buddhism, in which

there was no belief in the grace of God or in the efficacy of prayer. Gotama Buddha was himself a converted man and under his preaching sudden conversions occurred among all classes of hearers. The Buddhist Psalms of the Brethren and of the Sisters are the work of men and women who were constrained to record their conversion experience in song. Some of them came from the most degraded classes of society. Among the Sufis conversions were expected and often took place with dramatic suddenness. In Hinduism, those who turned away from the cold intellectualism of the Way of Knowledge and preached salvation by loving-devotion (bhakti), sometimes found themselves in the midst of a revival movement, which reminds one strangely of the Welsh Revival of 1904-5. Religious fervour would sweep a whole country-side like a prairie fire. Now when it has been shown that conversion is as widely distributed as the human race, it cannot rightly be regarded as a superstition or vulgarism lingering on among a few sectarians who are devoid of culture and refinement. The fact of conversion is much more impressive when it is seen to be co-extensive with humanity and not a phenomenon confined to one creed or sect. The truth is that those, who have always declared that conversion must have a central place in Christian experience, have been building upon broader and deeper foundations than they knew.

(2) The psychological study of religious experience has given rise to the notion that conversion is capable of explanation on solely psychological lines. Various anti-Christian writers have done their best to spread abroad the impression that psychology has explained conversion away. These writers apparently think that when they have described the stages and processes by which some resultant has come to be, they have answered every question the human mind can raise about it. They fail to see that they have only answered the question "How?" and have left untouched the question "Why?" The same mistake was made when controversy raged over the newly framed hypothesis of evolution. It was then confidently affirmed that if evolution was the method by which the universe came into being, the notion of a divine Creator was superfluous. But as Martineau pointed out at the time, It is not the less God who has done a thing when we have found out how He has done it. So also in the psychological study of religious experience, investigation only shows us the methods God uses in turning a soul to Himself, but it is not the less He who has turned the soul. Indeed, we may say that wherever the human soul aspires above the commonplace, there the grace of God is at work. When the psychologist has resolved the conversion of

the Apostle Paul into a conflict of complexes and has said all there is for psychology to say about it, the Apostle's own religious explanation of his conversion still holds good: "It pleased God to reveal His Son in me."

Another favourite trick of anti-religious writers is to demonstrate the lowly origins of some religious belief or institution and then to pour scorn upon it because of its sorry beginnings. But when we are trying to form an estimate of anything we must look not only to its lowly origins but also to its fullest development. The mathematical calculations of a Cambridge Senior Wrangler (to say nothing of the book-keeping of the City of London) are not invalidated because the mathematical faculty has evolved from lowly beginnings, when primitive man could not count more than ten, the number of the fingers on his hands. As the late Dr. John Kelman said, "This intrusion of the question of origins upon the living experience-knowledge of the soul is the biggest red-herring in the world. It has been trailed across the path of religious knowledge, and has led vast multitudes off the scent in their pursuit of truth."

(3) The development of educational methods and the application of them to our Sunday School work has, in certain quarters, given rise to the notion that you can educate men and women into the Christian way of life and may, therefore, dispense with decision. Here I do not wish to be misunderstood. I am whole-heartedly in favour of modern methods in the Sunday School. I also know that those who lead the movement for better Sunday School methods are as keen on securing conversions as I am. But the touchiness they display if anyone points out the dangers of their methods, as they are understood and applied by some of their followers, shows that they are unconsciously aware of the peril now pointed out. Sometimes they protest overmuch.

Now as a recent writer on Conversion has said, without decision religion becomes inept. It would be disastrous to our Churches if our educational methods led our young people to the stage at which they admire Christ and the Christian way of life, *and took them no further*. Of what use to the Kingdom of God are people who admire an ideal for which they are not prepared to make the great decision? They never do effective Christian work, for it is only decision which can set free the creative energies of their souls. The cause of Christ is served only by those who have decided for Him and His way of life. Those who admire Him and do nothing more are a source of weakness to our Churches, and if they are patronising, they are positively harmful. Our educational methods, which have come

to stay, need not, and must not, stultify themselves in the manner they are sometimes in danger of doing. I venture, therefore, to repeat that our educational methods have not made decision superfluous; and all things become new only to him who surrenders to—decides for—Christ and to no other.

(4) For some years there has been a falling away from religion on a stupendous scale. We are only just beginning to investigate and understand the causes of this drift from religion. It would take me far beyond the scope of this paper if I attempted to indicate what these causes are. It is sufficient to say that for some time we have been developing a type of civilisation and a mood of mind that are inimical to religion. The prevailing mental atmosphere is not one in which religion can easily thrive. The faith of multitudes is not in God but in applied science and in social reform. We are living in times in which the truth of the Psalmist's words are being abundantly justified, "Their sorrows shall be multiplied that exchange the Lord for another God." And conversion has suffered in the slump that has fallen upon religion. It could not have been otherwise.

I am, however, one of those who believe that we are on the eve of a return to religion, and among the hopeful signs we may count the fact that the necessity of conversion is being stressed in unexpected quarters, as, for instance, in Lawrence Hyde's *The Learned Knife*. The argument of that remarkable book is that the present state of civilisation is the product of a one-sided interest in the externals of life and is due to the modern man's neglect of the problems of the inner life. "The great assumption at the basis of all sociological research is that you can create the form of a new society simply by clear-headedness and patience alone, that you are engaged in an enterprise which you can carry through without the need of God, faith, spiritual values and love." That is how men talked twenty years ago. But Mr. Hyde points out that to-day things are different. "People are losing faith in all attempts to refashion society which involve nothing more than a process of resourceful organisation. It is becoming more and more evident that however ingeniously you plan, however sane and enlightened the principles you lay down, you cannot do away with the great fact of Original Sin, which is perpetually producing manifestations which render the results of all your planning almost nugatory." Hence he claims that we are increasingly being driven back to the need for personal regeneration. It is ever becoming clearer to reformers that it is not enough to modify a man's circumstances to make his life one of freedom and happiness. We must begin at the beginning and concentrate

on the inner life of man. Instead of beginning with a man's circumstances, we must begin with the man. Instead of working from the outside inward, we must work from within outward. In a word, conversion is the only fundamental way of reforming the world. "Concentrate on the soul of the individual and you deal with all your problems at their source." That is the thesis of Mr. Hyde's remarkable book. The hope of the world and the possibility of saving our civilisation lie with religion and not with politicians, psychologists, eugenists and sociologists, whose attempts to patch up the present situation can end only in failure. We may certainly take courage when the necessity of conversion is stressed by independent thinkers of the type of Mr. Hyde. The days are coming, if they have not already arrived, when we may aim at conversions in our preaching with a greater assurance that men are feeling the need of it. The ground into which the seed of the gospel is to fall in the future is not likely to be so barren as it has been for some years past.

Concerning our future preaching for conversions two things may be said.

(1) We must not standardise conversion. Perhaps Free Churchmen have suffered somewhat from the tyranny of the Pauline type of conversion. But not all conversions need be sudden, nor is it necessary to date them, as John Wesley could his. There is no reason why everybody should be able to say—"On such and such a date I became a child of God." Conversion is a turning to Christ and a surrender to Him. Sometimes the turning will take place with startling and dramatic suddenness; at other times it will be as gradual as the dawn. All know the difference between night and day, but none would be prepared to mark down a single moment and say, "This was the exact turning-point." In other words, there are plenty of conversions in which it is impossible to say at what moment the dividing line was crossed, but no one need be left in doubt that it has been crossed.

In this connection it is important to have a clear idea about the central and essential thing in conversion. It is not the experiences which precede it; nor is it the emotions that accompany it. All these differ with different individuals. The central thing in Christian conversion is not even what a man turns from but what he turns to—or better, it is He to whom he turns. In its essence Christian conversion is a surrender to Christ. As long as that surrender is there, it does not matter whether the conversion process was sudden or gradual nor what were the feelings which accompanied it.

This point is stressed because in the past a good deal of

harm was done, when all who professed conversion were expected to have gone through the same emotional experiences. Before they were received into the Church they were put through a fairly stiff doctrinal examination. They were expected to have a deep sense of sin, to feel a deep need of a Saviour, to have a doctrine of the Atonement and some idea of Justification by Faith. And they were expected to speak in the religious vernacular of their elders. What was the result? In some cases there was a good deal of unreality, as the following passage from Mark Rutherford's *Autobiography* will show. "I knew that I had to be a 'child of God,' and after a time I professed myself one, but cannot call to mind that I was anything else than I had always been, save that I was perhaps a little more hypocritical. . . . I was obliged to declare myself convinced of sin, convinced of the efficacy of the Atonement, convinced that I was forgiven, convinced that the Holy Ghost was shed abroad in my heart; and convinced of a great many other things which were the merest phrases."

One has often wondered whether the trouble with some of our young people is just this. They have formed their own notions about what we who are already Church members expect from them—the kind of religious experience we are looking for in them. When they do not find these expectations realised in themselves they think there is something wrong, something lacking, and they hold back. Their minds are fogged with wrong expectations. Some make the mistake of trying to work themselves up into what they imagine to be the right state of mind. This is a mistake. It makes for unreality. In some of them there is a real religious life, though it may not conform to the pattern which they have been led to believe is the normal. Ministers of Jesus Christ must have enough spiritual discrimination to recognise grades and phases of genuine religious experience which are different from their own. Another mistake in dealing with the young people has been pointed out by that acute thinker H. H. Farmer. He says, "Too often men are invited to do some vague thing called 'accepting Christ,' without any serious attempt being made to enable them to see clearly, and be gripped by, the Christ they are called upon to accept."

If we refuse to standardize conversion, we shall be prepared to find a great many different motives leading men and women to Christ. There is no hint in the Gospels that our Lord ever dictated the needs of which men should be conscious when they came to Him. It was enough if they felt a need and came to Him and surrendered to Him and His way of life. He knew that they would go on to find in Him more than they had

expected or sought. There is, then, no set type of conversion experience and no inevitable order.

(2) We must avoid the mistake of conventional evangelism of giving the impression that conversion is the sum total of the Christian life. We must insist that the converted man is not the perfect man. He is not even a "saved man." He is certainly reconciled to God. He is certainly justified; but equally certainly he is not sanctified. In some conversions of the sudden type certain gross sins and vices may instantaneously lose their hold upon a man's soul. But such converts have yet before them the task of building up a Christ-like character; and that they can only do gradually and amidst many failures. It is only by some such emphasis as this that we shall be able to remove the reproach, noted by Dr. Alexander Whyte, that "evangelical preaching has concentrated on the beginning of the Christian life to the neglect of its later growth . . . and has thus been far less fitted to give guidance in the vicissitudes of its further development." In a word, we must insist that no man is a truly converted man unless he is constantly renewing his surrender to Christ. The eighth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans is just as important as the seventh. "He that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved" (Matt. x. 22).

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EDMUND BLOOD, of Duffield, in Derbyshire, who died 1588, founded two families, an Irish and an English.

His eldest son, Edmond, went to Ireland, and became M.P. for Ennis, 1613-1635. In the eighth generation this main line is represented by General Sir Bindon Blood, born 1842. The second son of this Edmond was Thomas of Dunboyne, whose son was the famous Colonel Thomas Blood. The colonel's eldest son, Thomas, who helped him steal the crown, went to Albany, in New York. Another son, Holcroft, rose to be general, dying 1707; his career is in the Dictionary of National Biography.

Edmund's son, Robert Blood, settled at Tamworth. His son Richard married Johanna Voughton, whose sister was mother of Thomas Guy, the Baptist philanthropist, M.P. for Tamworth. Richard's family has ramified widely, and since 1767 the Birmingham line has had a Guy Blood in each generation. The Tamworth line is extinct, the Birmingham line dying.