

Authority in Religion.

BY THE REV. H. A. WILSON, M.A.,

Vicar of St. Peter's, Norbiton.

II. AUTHORITY OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE.

PERSONAL experience of the living Christ within us is the only sure and authoritative basis of faith. By this personal experience of Christ we mean the innate consciousness of God in man developed, drawn out, and ultimately perfected by the ministrations of the Divine Spirit within, taking of the things of Christ and showing them to us. There can be no faith, in the true sense, without this personal knowledge of Christ; and when it is ours, in however slight a degree, nothing can be more real, no proof more irrefragable. Historical arguments however closely reasoned, philosophical disquisitions however clever, pale beside this consciousness of Christ. When the Spirit of God witnesseth to our spirits that we are the children of God, we are above the reach of hostile arguments and beyond the need of favourable ones. For instance, the faith of a believer in the Resurrection of the Lord can be shaken by no possible argument. The Resurrection may be proved physically impossible and generally incredible; but if he has had dealings with the Risen Lord, *he knows*, and he is as certain that his Lord is not mouldering in His tomb as he is of his own existence.

“All religious philosophies which seek other subjective grounds for faith than that claimed in the New Testament—the witness of the spirit of God in the spirit of man—utterly fail to recognize, and must finally fail to satisfy, the central needs of the human soul.”¹

“In the absence of” this “experience we do not know to what we can appeal. But to one who has really gone through this life-experience, the fact of such a salvation is the truest thing we can know; it is more of a fact even than the soul it

¹ Whately, “The Inner Light,” p. 1.

saves. To him it is at the least *as* true as his own soul and his own sin. He knows that salvation, that Redeemer, as he knows his own life—nay, more intimately; he stakes his eternal all on such knowledge.”¹

Christ told us definitely and explicitly that He was ever present in the world, that the Holy Spirit would come to us, take up His abode in us, and minister the truth to us. The Incarnation did not terminate with the Passion and Death: they only ushered in a fuller and deeper epoch in its activity. The Death of Christ “was the inauguration of a new dispensation of revelation, not the termination of an era of direct Divine intercourse with mankind; and . . . this new dispensation is characterized by *inwardness*—by the action of the Spirit of Christ bearing witness with our spirit.”²

Having made sufficiently clear what we mean by the authority of personal experience, we can pass on to consider the subject in some detail.

The advantages of this position are many.

1. *It recalls us to the true idea of faith.*

We have already seen the danger of confusing faith or belief with a mere acquiescence in a body of truth; indeed, we see the danger around us in every direction to-day. It is not enough for salvation that a man “should thus think”; he must also thus feel and know. When St. Paul said, “I know whom I have believed,” he was basing his words upon a direct and personal intercourse and knowledge, and, without this, no man has any vital faith in Christ. It should hardly be necessary to labour this point, but in view of the present level of religious life, this fact must be constantly emphasized. Our churches are filled with multitudes who, Sunday by Sunday, murmur a mechanical assent to a body of truth, and one feels sometimes moved to interrupt the volume of murmuring with an earnest and searching “Do ye now believe?” They assent to the statement that they believe in the life and death and rising

¹ Forsyth, “Principle of Authority,” p. 20.

² Inge, “Faith and its Psychology,” pp. 129-130.

again of the Lord, but this may be far removed from knowing "Him and the power of His Resurrection." True faith, we insist, begins and finds its expression in a personal love for, and experience of, the Living Christ. "This love to Jesus we have when once we have experienced that it is through Him that God communes with us. The religious life of the Christian is inseparable from vision of the personal life of Jesus. That vision must be the Christian's constant companion."¹

2. *Its evidential value.*

By this stress upon the reality of faith, we make it a more attractive thing and infinitely more impressive to the world at large. A Christian *professor* may be anything or nothing; his creeds may be, and most often are, things outside of his real self; his religion a mere externality. But the Christian *believer* can be only one thing: a man with the power of God within, ever seeking to express the inner power in holy life and conduct. There is an arresting power in such a thing as this, which the non-believer is quick to admire and envy. If true religion is such as this, he desires it, but a mere abstract profession, detached from the truest part of his nature, he values and desires not at all. How, too, can he deny the reality of a religion which produces such a belief?

"Common sense and scientific criticism and medical pathology may freely prune its eccentricities to the limit of their will. But there remains an immense and unexplained residuum, of the best and noblest of our race, men and women, who . . . have lived the lives of saints and heroes, or died the death of martyrs, and furthered by their action and passion, and, as they trusted, their prayers, the material, moral, social, spiritual welfare of mankind, solely in reliance on their personal intercourse with God."²

A belief of this kind cannot be a delusion, for if so then a lie is more beautiful and attractive than the truth.

¹ Herrmann, "Communion with God," p. 109.

² Illingworth, "Personality, Human and Divine," pp. 132, 133.

3. *It gives scope for the expansion of the truth.*

True enough the faith was once for all delivered to the saints, but that faith is embodied in—nay, it *is*—Christ Himself, who told His disciples He had many things to say unto them, but they could not bear it then. That faith is Christ, who is for all times and for all men ever adapting Himself (if one may so speak) to the needs and requirements—intellectual, social, and personal—of every man. To use the words “faith once delivered” as evidence that all God’s truth has been enclosed in a creed, or in all the creeds put together, is to devitalize the Gospel and to deny the truth of Christ’s words that He had yet more to reveal to men.

“The abiding claim of Christ to our allegiance is that He, and He alone, by His life and, pre-eminently, by His death, has fully disclosed to humanity the redemptive purpose and the redemptive *action* of God. But inasmuch as the disclosure, while valid for all time, has been made in a historic life correlated to the environment of a particular age, the eternal truth embodied in Christ is perpetually undergoing re-interpretation under the changing conditions of humanity. Since it is the will of God that man is subject in every part of his nature to the law of development, and since it is the redemption and consecration of that nature in its totality which Christ came to achieve, man’s apprehension of the Incarnate Verity cannot but vary with the form and content of his intellectual and ethical experience. What he sees he must see with his own eyes in that definite concrete shape which makes it the illumination of his individual life.”¹

But on the other hand there are objections which can be urged with much force against the position that personal experience is the only and final ground of faith.

1. *It is argued that this is mere subjectivity, and consequently of no objective value.*

“A direct experience of God is something merely ‘given.’ We have it while we have it; but we cannot pass it on to any-

¹ Forrest, “The Authority of Christ,” pp. 429, 430.

one else; and if we try to establish its rationality, then it loses its immediacy, and becomes merely one phenomenon among religious phenomena in general. If analyzed, it is direct experience no longer. So it stands high and dry amid all the stress and change of our intellectual life."¹ In this clear way Dr. Whately states this objection with which he proceeds to deal.

Though we admit that this experience is subjective, yet we protest that this does not rob it of all objective value—far from it. It is subjective experiences which dominate the nature and mould the character, and, as we have above stated, the life within will out. A personal experience and knowledge of Christ will prove itself to be the mightiest force in the purification of the individual; Christ will little by little be "re-incarnated" in him. The objective force of such a fact cannot be overestimated. "Experience is personal and individual, yet it carries conviction even to those who are strangers to it."² And when we go further and see that that individual experience, manifesting itself in holy conduct, is infinitely multiplied and "Christ is formed" in men, women, and children of all classes and kinds, and ages and countries, it becomes an objective proof of truth and reality which admits of no denial.

2. *But what guarantee does it give against the vagaries of the individual?*

It must be freely conceded that here is a forceful objection. One man's experience has as much right to respect as another's; and it is a plain fact of history that the doctrine of the Inner Light has been the refuge, and is to-day, for cranks and eccentrics of all kinds. Even heretical and inadequate forms of religion have based themselves upon a special illumination.

The vision of the Virgin at Lourdes, *e.g.*, it is urged, stands upon the same plane as the Christian's intercourse with his Risen Redeemer. But this is not really so. The change which personal experience with Christ achieves is different in essence

¹ Whately, "The Inner Light," p. 30.

² David Smith, "The Historic Jesus," p. 109.

from all others ; it is not merely sensational and emotional, it is a spiritual and moral upheaval at the spiritual and moral centre of the life "as is shown by the absolute rest and decisive finality of its moral effect in" the "life and conduct."¹

But what safeguard does it afford against inadequate forms of religion ?

It is well known that the basis of Quakerism is this teaching of Illumination, and their system has no real place for the Sacraments ; that Dr. Martineau took his stand upon "the Inner Witness of the Spirit" and denied the divinity of Christ.

Our answer to this really difficult question must be short, but we must strive to be clear.

The term "religious experience" embraces all the highest functions of the man, not only spiritual and moral activities, but all the mental and intellectual processes as well. So that mere fads as contrary to the general experience and general intelligence are at once suspect. A genuine experience, then, cannot be contrary to reason, though it may be beyond reason. Freedom must be conceded to the individual ; but though the range within which freedom is allowed is vast, yet it has limits, and those limits are fixed by the general consensus of belief. In our national life we boast of our freedom, and that freedom is a very real and very precious thing ; but at the same time there are lines drawn, beyond which the individual must not claim the right to transgress. This, indeed, may be pressed further in the direction of character. "For every man is a member of the human society, and it may well be that there is a specific type of character which he ought to acquire."² So, too, in spiritual things. The religious eccentric is not to be encouraged. The passive resister and the militant suffragist are not sufficiently popular and satisfactory to justify any encouragement of their prototypes in the religious realm.

What, then, can we place as checks to extravagance of religious fervour ?

¹ Forsyth in *Hibbert Journal*, vol. vi., No. 3, p. 492.

² W. Temple, "The Kingdom of God," p. 46.

It is here that the authority of Bible and Church step in to control and direct. An experience contrary to that of the Christian Church must be regarded with grave suspicion, and an experience contradictory to the primary revelation and to the men to whom that revelation was vouchsafed cannot be accepted as genuine, for truth cannot falsify itself.

So these three—Bible, Church, and personal experience—must stand together, and standing thus united in their testimony they cannot be shaken.

