

Of Tact

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TACT may be defined as a ready and delicate sense of what is fitting in our dealings with others, so as to avoid causing needless offence on the one hand, and to conciliate on the other. Delicate tasks, not only in the political arena but also in the circumstances of everyday life, require fineness of instinct, and a due regard for the "imponderabilia" in all human relations. And that is just where tact comes in.

There is also the positive side. The tactful man, like the gentleman, will bear and forbear; though candid, he will not be harsh in his verdicts on his fellows; though impartial in his judgments he will be tolerant, making allowance for human weakness and error; kindly in his attitude towards those that differ, he will be scrupulous in steering clear of anything that might needlessly provoke resentment. In discussion he will endeavour to evade collisions that do not advance the argument, nor will he indulge in cheap retorts, even though tempted to do so, knowing that he loses more than he gains in a momentary victory won by such means. He will be anxious to see his opponent's point of view, giving him credit for honesty of intention, whenever possible. This does not mean that he should not hold his own in dealing with an opponent; but he will try to speak the truth in modesty, with a tender regard for idiosyncrasies of attitude and temper.

No more beautiful example of this can be found than in Paul's letter to Philemon, where, with exquisite insight and understanding, the great Apostle makes his point without ruffling the sentiments or self-esteem of his friend, while he pleads with him to show mercy to his runaway slave. There is a yet higher example of tact in our Lord's dealing with the woman of Samaria: He knows her sordid past, and says so: but with what perfect tact He refers to it! Similarly in the case of the woman taken in adultery. He does not condone her sin, as His final words show; but there is no harshness

there, only a massive pity, which must have left an indelible impression on His hearer. Such is tact when revealed in the supreme degree.

The tactful man will never indulge in exhibitionism, or mere party spirit, being well aware that such things are indicative not so much of any firm hold of truth as of a desire to emphasize some personal and particular point of attachment, or to win a momentary triumph over an antagonist. In his inmost soul he is sure that this is not the way to convince. Argument alone, unless kept within due limits, rarely convinces; it is too intellectual in its appeal, and the intellect is not everything. Far otherwise: "the heart too has its reasons" as Pascal so finely observed. If our object is to win an opponent we must use persuasion. This is the better line of approach. For how hard it is to keep the temper in discussion, to evoke light rather than heat in the conduct of affairs!

Not that the disentangling of the body of truth from the meshes of error ought ever to be forgotten, as a primary end in any controversial question. Truth must be our first concern—"truth ever, truth only the excellent" as Browning exclaimed. But to achieve this end requires assiduous care, and a tender appreciation of human fallibility. We do ill to force upon someone our own (perhaps deeply cherished) convictions, clear enough to us but difficult for him readily to grasp. Gentleness in dealing with error; a willingness to listen to another, even when we cannot agree with him; a reluctance to trample on another's feelings; a willingness to concede a point where no high principle is involved: all these virtues are part and parcel of that tact which, at its best, is one of the Christian graces.

There are times and occasions when a resolute stand must be made, when justice and truth compel us to attack what is morally corrupt in thought or expression or policy; yet even in these cases there should be a studied avoidance of acrimony. To show ourselves, in some unguarded moment, "willing to wound, and yet afraid to strike," can but engender needless opposition to views which, more wisely and tactfully put forward, might achieve the purpose we have in view. The natural pride of the spirit, the reluctance to admit ourselves in the wrong—these difficulties must be frankly dealt with. Orientals are apt to lay stress on what is

called "saving face"; and this should be borne in mind whenever we attempt the task of bringing another's opinion into line with our own.

Consider how political, as well as social life, could be calmed and sweetened if only problems and hard questions were dealt with in a conciliatory temper. Tact in handling such matters—not seldom of vital consequences—might frequently bring to unity and amity those who are too ready to imagine that truth is to be found only on the side they have chosen to champion. Truth indeed is one; but the approaches to Truth may be many and various. Consider, too, the need for tact in our discussions and disputes on religious matters. Given the grace of tact, half our difficulties (not seldom connected with words rather than with realities) might be solved, and theological differences robbed of their recurring acrimony. It is a consummation devoutly to be wished. And the same thing holds good in what, after all, concerns the majority of men most intimately—their domestic life.

Another point: we make a mistake if we overlook humour as an ingredient, and a delightful ingredient, in tact itself. Humour is hard to define, and perhaps no complete definition is possible. Like the word "poetry," it can be felt instinctively even when it cannot be formally expressed. Humour is a lambent thing, which, playing half mockingly, half tenderly, about the mind, gives to its happy possessor a curious yet delicate charm. Unlike wit, humour is a thing of the heart rather than of the head. It readily sees the amusing side of life, or the small absurdities we are apt to indulge in when off our guard, yet it is ever charitable to the failings inherent in our common humanity. It is true that a man may be conscious of the ridiculous without possessing any real humour—in the right sense of the term; and, so far, he lacks something that adds immeasurably, though perhaps unconsciously, to the grace of life. The tactful man, if he is "totus teres atque rotundus," will surely have some portion of humour in his composition. It will, so to speak, suffuse his personality as light through a painted window suffuses a room, or as sunshine dipping suddenly from a cloud will transform and glorify a landscape.

I believe we have lost much in our reading of the Gospels by not observing places where the "humour" of Jesus is

suggested or revealed. In the stately periods of the Authorized Version this feature of our Lord's attitude to life does not readily emerge. But it is there. Yes (it will be said), that may be; yet it is never reported that He laughed. Nevertheless He must have done so—He who was deeply human in His outlook and His sympathies, and who knew what was in man. Perfect love, we are told, casteth out fear; yet love itself in some unaccountable fashion may be touched with humour; and this cannot be cast out, save to the impoverishment of personality. And the man of ready tact, cognizant of this, will not be slow to welcome the gift of humour—for gift it is—as a genuine endowment of the spirit. It has its place, if only a subordinate place, in the hierarchy of virtues.

Tact may not, it is true, resolve all our doubts or remove all the harshness and vulgarities of life; but it will do much—that “touch-faculty” of which Ruskin wrote, when he described it as “a fineness and fulness of sensation beyond reason”; the guide of reason itself, uplifted in the spirit of kindness, and sanctified by the gospel of peace.

THE CHALLENGE OF CALAMITY

S. Nowell-Rostron, M.A., B.D. (Lutterworth Press.) 7s. 6d.

We are glad to be able to commend this “Study of the book of Job,” from the pen of one of the vice-presidents of the National Church League, as a solid contribution to the study of Biblical literature.

A number of passages in the book might have been written for these very days. Certainly the message of the book is most apposite for our own times. From this point of view, the title is most fitting. Job's problems frequently are ours, and one wishes that many of us could face them with the same unshaken faith that God is, and that He rules, which Job himself most tenaciously held in spite of his complainings and bitter words.

The book is in the form of a commentary, and with the help of its full notes and copious references, the student is provided with a guide towards an understanding of the message of the book.

The summaries and analyses of the various speeches are most helpful, and the many side glances allowed to the reader help in an appreciation and estimation of the various characters and their views.

There can be no question that the book reaches a great height in its examination and exposition of God's answer to Job. The chapter, “The Living Redeemer,” is excellent. “In this chapter Job reaches the climax of his despair and from it by a leap of faith he rises to the summit of his hope” (p. 110).

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