

PERSONALITY AND GRACE.

VI. FAITH.

THE question now is, where are we to find a beginning? If grace is just another name for the dealings of God's love, yet if, as has been maintained, a doctrine of grace should not operate with love at all, with what material must we start to build? The answer that grace works by faith may easily seem more orthodox than obvious. Why should faith have that pre-eminence among the graces? If grace is just the working of love, why, in spite of all that has been said, should not the response it requires also be the working of love? Or if, owing to deficiency in ourselves, that is impossible, is it not by hope that we should advance to a more perfect state?

The answer, to some extent, has been already given. The reason is simply that as God would stand to our souls, not merely in a relationship of grace, but in a gracious relationship, we ought to commence with the recognition of that fact. To begin with love might only mean the recognition of an impersonal influx of God into the soul, whereas to begin with faith is to recognise that God's whole relation to us is one of personal love.

Faith works by love and for that matter also by hope. It is trust in a love of God not yet realised or even perfectly manifested. But without passing through faith, without going through our personality, as it were, in that indirect curve, love would neither be ethical nor spiritual. It would only be an emotional affection of the mind always in danger of degenerating into sentiment. Unless it come through a personal relation of trust, it never can be a personal regard, reverencing God for Himself and man for what he has of God's image. Faith in short is the right

beginning precisely because it means beginning with God, not ourselves.

It is possible, however, to begin wrongly with faith as well as with love. We may expect it also as an influx and cherish it as the merit whereby God saves. It then ceases to be faith, just as love, as an influx and a merit, ceases to be love in any ethical and spiritual sense. In the one case as in the other the eyes are turned away from God and directed to ourselves. Faith then becomes a state of feeling which has to be cherished and cultivated; and that task constantly leads to a mixture of excited emotions, stimulated confessions and suppressed intellectual convictions. The result is moral insincerity and religious unreality.

There is only one right way of beginning with faith. That is to begin with an object which constrains belief. Unless, when we consider the object, belief itself arises, unless, when we consider the object, we have no need to constrain belief but cannot help believing, faith has no reality. We have, in short, no right to believe in anything except in so far as it impresses us as true. To try to impress ourselves contrary to the impression of the object itself, is to forget that truth is the basis of all moral motive and reality, of all religious victory. The sacrifice of sincerity and of the sense of reality can, therefore, never be the way to true faith. A true faith, in the last issue, is simply faith in the truth because it convinces us that it is true.

Unbelief may be a perilous moral state, but that is not because we have failed to suppress criticism or contrary convictions. To attempt any such thing is also a perilous moral state. In the strict sense unbelief is not even wrong because we have not tried to believe. We have no right to believe anything we can avoid believing in, if we give it due freedom to convince us. Unbelief is never wrong

except on the one condition that by some kind of hypocrisy we ward off the impact of truth upon our spirits.

The question, therefore, is, what object of faith exists belief in which can only be averted by some kind of juggling with our own response to it? We fail to see that relation of the object of faith to our belief because we speak of the object of faith abstractly as the love of God and look for its operation not here and now but in a life with other conditions than ours. We do not, however, really believe that God is love till we believe that love is God, till, in whatever weakness we meet it, we can say here is omnipotence. To see that by our own insight is to have faith.

Jesus brings faith to a practical issue by making the object of faith the blessedness of the Kingdom of God. That is the touchstone of all His teaching, the proof that men have known and believed.

By adopting the forms into which we have analysed personality, we might speak of the object of faith as, first, the blessedness of a right self-consciousness. The note of it is being poor in spirit. With that goes grieving and meekness—a heart responsive to man and submissive to God. To be poor in spirit is not to be weak or succumb to life, but to be strong and victorious over life through the assurance that all our life comes from God. In that way we are masters of our whole self-conscious world, because all that comes into it comes from God, from love.

Second, it is the blessedness of the right self-legislation. The note of it is hungering and thirsting after righteousness. Not a stern, hard conscience, but only unsatisfied reaching after the infinite righteousness can direct us aright. This also has a human side. It has learned to pity not condemn. That is the true, the vital note which no merely moral doctrine of conscience can strike. Also it has a divine side. The pure in heart see God, not surely for self-satisfaction, but

in order that all our moral ideals should lose their boundaries and look out upon the infinite.

Finally, there is the blessedness of the right self-determination. Blessed are, not those who are at peace, but those who make peace. That also has a human side. It involves being persecuted for righteousness' sake and having all manner of evil said against us falsely. We shall know that our will is on the side of the right kind of peace when we meet its foes, and we shall know that it is master of all our fears when we can face them and be at peace. It has also a Divine side. As it is a prophet's victory, it will have a prophet's reward. Nowhere will that reward be found save in the heavens, nowhere, that is to say, except in the very order of love in the might of which we are called to stand.

The ground of that blessedness is simply the discovery that the final order of the world is of love not violence. That discovery is faith, and the man who has it is blessed, because he knows that all the reality he is conscious of is in his own power, because he sees the ideals by which he can direct himself in the midst of it, and because he has conquered the fears by which he might be hindered from determining it.

If any man really have such a faith, it can only be on one ground. He can receive it because he has in some way seen that his true blessedness is in actual reality of that nature. Love somehow must have made its own appeal and have been its own evidence. The question is not how are we to force ourselves to believe, but how, being face to face with the facts, we escape the necessity of believing. How, if love is in reality the final order and the highest security, can we go on believing that the final order can be of force and the final security in wealth and battleships? How can we fall so far from

truth, as to put our faith at times in the manifest fruits of injustice? How can we even be envious at the wicked and contemptuous of the righteous?

The answer is not, as we imagine, intellectual independence. On the contrary, independence of mind is essential to right faith. No man can ever receive it from another. Except he see it for himself, he does not believe it at all. Still less can the hindrance be moral independence. We shall never believe so long as we accept our standard of life from others and refuse to stand on our own feet and let God speak to us.

Not perplexity of any kind but insincerity is our real hindrance. Only the force of God's own appeal as it speaks in life to our own hearts can enable us to believe in that way in God's love. But that appeal hypocrisy alone can ward off. Hypocrisy is just the refusal to allow the deep realities of life to touch us, whereas faith comes through utter openness to reality, for we only truly believe in that about which we are not afraid to ask any question or await any issue. Wherefore, in the Gospels hypocrisy is the only deadly sin, just because it is the one sure way of averting the impact of God upon our souls.

As there could be no joy in sinning without some element of pleasant self-delusion, a measure of hypocrisy exists in all sins, even the most open and flagrant. A libertine may boast of his conquest, but he never allows himself to face the straight issue of what it means. He does not say to himself that he has bought a nobler personality than his own for money which he was not even man enough to earn for himself, nor does he ever look straight at the shadows of degradation and death behind. Indeed gross, open vices are simply nests of self-delusions. Who, for example, ever knew a drunkard, and did not know one who lied to himself? Yet the danger of hypocrisy increases with the respectability

of the sin. Nay there is no need to have any conscious transgression at all, for the most blinding of all hypocrisies is just the amazing spiritual illusion that privilege is merit and not responsibility. In that sense, as Professor A. B. Davidson put it, "perhaps mankind is one large Pharisee."

For that reason, and that reason alone, unbelief is the most universal and most deep-seated corruption in the heart of man. Yet, as faith is not a direct moral act which we should purpose and carry through, unbelief is not directly culpable. Faith is not of ourselves, it is the gift of God, and unless it is the gift of God, it is not faith. Nevertheless, it is not the gift of God in the sense that God implants it in the spirit by a mere arbitrary act of omnipotence. That also would not be faith, for faith is simply our own conviction that a thing is true, and that has no right to be derived from anything but the impression of the object itself. It is the gift of God in the far higher sense that God presents Himself through all His dealings with us as worthy of trust. His manifestation is a gospel, good news which is its own evidence. Yet, if we can only disbelieve it because we have shut our hearts against its appeal, because through wilful self-delusion we have averted its impact upon our spirits, unbelief may be the gravest of all moral situations, for it would mean that we love darkness rather than light.

In the strict sense we have no right to exhort people to believe, and most exhortations of that kind simply leave earnest people painfully and fruitlessly endeavouring to lift themselves by their own waistbands. Then, as their attention is directed to themselves and not to God, they are apt to regard faith as merely a self-maintained state of nervous tension.

But did not Jesus require belief as a condition of His working, and did not Paul say to the Philippian jailer,

“ Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved,” and are not men exhorted to “ Repent and believe the gospel ” ? But Jesus was there, and only asked to be allowed to make His due impression ; repentance is precisely the way in which we put away the hypocrisies which prevent the gospel from being its own evidence to us ; and, finally, the words in Acts cannot possibly, in the circumstances, be more than a summary of Paul’s presentation of the object of belief. Paul’s method at least is not in doubt. He reasoned of righteousness and judgment to come. He reasoned from men’s experience of God’s goodness in life and from their groping after Him. He made reasoned presentation of the significance of Jesus Christ for faith, and he always set that presentation in an atmosphere of humble and sincere dealing with one’s own soul in which alone men can see the things in which they ought to believe.

There is only one right way of asking men to believe : to present to them what they ought to believe because it is true. And there is only one right way of persuading : to present what is true in such a way that nothing will prevent them from seeing it except the desire to abide in darkness. And there is only one further way of helping them : to point out what they are cherishing that is opposed to faith. When all that has been done it is still necessary to recognise that faith is God’s gift not ours, His manifestation of the truth by life, not ours by argument, and that even He is willing to fail till He can have the only success love could value—personal acceptance of the truth simply because it is true.

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