

RELIGIOUS FASHIONS.

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IN the everyday life of mankind, all things are ruled by fashion. Custom is the standard in matters commonly called "secular": some things are "correct," others are not; and to transgress the unwritten rule is at the worst "bad form," and at the best eccentricity. And while it would not be difficult to point to some advantages in this universal tendency of mankind, it is quite notorious that it may and often does lead to perilous developments in the ethical sphere.

We are concerned to-day with those aspects of life which are more distinctively connected with the religious duties and experiences of the professed Christian. It is obvious that the same innate human tendency must be manifested in these; and that here, too, it is partly advantageous, partly perilous. And the Word of God, which is always true to nature, recognizes this fundamental fact from beginning to end, in exhortations and illustrations too numerous and familiar to need exemplification. Perhaps it would not be disputed by any that these relate more to the perils inherent in the tendency than to any advantages it may carry with it. At any rate it seems quite to the point to suggest that the warning note may be more necessary for our guidance, because both advantages and perils are so often likely to operate unconsciously, and while nothing but good can come in the former case, special watchfulness is needed with regard to the latter.

But although such Biblical illustrations are so familiar, it will serve our purpose well if we recall some of the more striking New Testament sayings which bear upon the subject. These, indeed, will aptly introduce those aspects of it which are proposed for more detailed examination presently. Consider the proud claim of the religious leaders of our Lord's time to set the fashion in religious thought. "Hath any of the rulers, or of the Pharisees, believed on Him?" Or His own application to those leaders of the prophecy of Isaiah—"teaching for doctrines the commandments of men": and His pronouncement in the very same context—"they be blind leaders of the blind." The deadly consequence of such blind following of passing religious fashion is summed up in a terse con-

demnation of the rulers by St. John—"they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God." Such perils beset both doctrine and practice; and later on we find St. Paul warning Asiatic converts against being "tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine."

What is the message of such a topic for our own day? Every generation has its special circumstances; and temptations which are universal take on very varied forms. It is proposed to deal briefly with three directions in which the rule of fashion in religious life is calling for watchfulness just at the present moment, and particularly in our own country—though by no means only here.

I

It may have more to do with the alarming spread of the "counter-Reformation" than is generally recognized. Anyone with memories of the last thirty to fifty years will realize how widespread the tendency has been to adopt methods and practices in worship, which in the early portions of that period were regarded with suspicion. There is no need to provoke controversy by going too far into details. It may be true enough that some of these changes have been entirely devoid of harmful significance, some even positively helpful. But the tendency to "be in the fashion" has led many to adopt a quite untenable position with regard to others, which are *in fact* illegal, or *in fact* likely to inculcate erroneous doctrine, whether they recognize it or not. An incumbent may declare quite truly that a certain posture, or a certain piece of ecclesiastical dress, or a certain practice in worship, is entirely devoid of significance to him. But he will never get over the fact that his adoption of it gives practical support to the aims of those to whom these things mean a great deal, and prepares his own people for the acceptance of the doctrine which those most concerned about their adoption declare to be signified and enforced by them. The adoption of current fashions has had its effect in matters of detail which many have never for a moment considered as capable of having such an effect—even the singing of hymns, as a recent correspondence in *The Record* has sufficiently testified. And was it not once suggested that if the people learned to sing *Hymns Ancient and Modern* they would learn about the doctrines of the movement we are discussing? If it was, the adoption

of that hymn-book in Evangelical Churches is sufficiently widespread! And what do we find? Is it a coincidence that many people talk of "altars" with perfect unconsciousness of anything disloyal to the Prayer Book, which carefully and designedly omits the word? But "altars" involve sacrifice; and we have quite enough contemporary evidence of the peril underlying that kind of looseness of speech. The controversy over Canon Bright's well-known hymn ("And now, O Father . . .") is an equally apt illustration. Many Evangelicals undoubtedly find it not only innocent but helpful to themselves. But there can be no question that it is exactly fitted to prepare the way for the doctrine now put forward in alternative Communion Services; and the correspondence above mentioned produced evidence, which has not been contradicted, that its author's intention was to teach doctrine of that general character.

And so we might go on. Evening Communion is not "in the fashion" in many Dioceses. The easiest course is to drop it. And the tendency is to emphasize unduly, almost to the exclusion of other times, and in a way calculated to support current doctrinal claims, an hour for that sacred service to which at any rate no such emphasis ought to be given, however helpful the practice may be to many. Nobody needs to attack those brethren who personally prefer that hour: but there can be no denying the peril of the prevailing fashion of extreme emphasis upon it, without any warrant of Scripture or of Prayer Book.

What is proposed to be done by Evangelicals, in face of this universal evidence of the effect of following prevailing fashions in religious life and worship? Certainly nothing that has hitherto been done by Evangelical representatives in the Church Assembly, as a body, provides the least hope of checking the landslide. On the contrary, the concessions to which most of them seem ready to agree can only have the effect of accelerating its progress and increasing its deadly effect.

II

Let us turn to an illustration of an altogether different kind—the claims of Christian discipleship in a world such as ours. From many points of view, the way in which fashion has overridden the very elements of Christian ethics and practice is a subject which

has been almost as prominently as the last before the minds of many in quite recent months, through the discussions arising from "Copec." Whatever may be thought of that movement, and with whatever reservations any of us may feel our attitude towards it is tempered, there can be no doubt that it has laid a heavy hand upon many terrible anomalies. If we do not ourselves approve of the basis or methods of "Copec," it is at least incumbent upon us to say how we ourselves propose to meet the inconsistencies in current "Christian" practice which it remorselessly exposes; and, indeed, how we propose to clear our souls from the guilt of any complicity in the prevailing "fashions" which are at the root of these practices.

But "Copec" would lead us too far to-day; and our purpose is a simpler one. Our Lord's standard for His followers is that they should not be of the world, although of necessity in the world; and again, that they should "renounce," or (as Dr. Weymouth so suggestively puts it) "detach themselves from" all that they have. Indeed, unless they do that, He plainly says they cannot be His disciples (Luke xiv. 33).

And are we doing that, in our generation? What is the usual standard of living, not among worldly people, nor even among mere professors of Christianity, but among really earnest followers of Christ? Can it by any stretch of imagination be described in such terms as those above quoted? They seem natural enough in the case of Apostles like St. Matthew or St. Peter or St. Paul. Perhaps we think they were suited well enough for those early days. But they are phrased in terms of universal import! They apply to the twentieth century no less than to the first.

And again, what is it to be "not of the world"? In what does "worldliness" consist? Those who give warning against its perils are apt to turn their attention to a list of habits and practices, which are denounced as worldly. And this is right enough, as far as it goes. Principles must be illustrated by detailed examples; and such a method is quite in accordance with our present aim in considering the dangers attaching to a heedless following of prevailing fashion. But it does not go far enough. In the last resort, worldliness is a matter of the heart and spirit. It may, indeed, be evidenced by practices such as are commonly condemned as worldly; yet those who avoid such practices are not therefore

necessarily unworldly in spirit. It is common to regard as worldly the indulgence in theatre-going and dancing and card-playing, and so forth: and it is no part of our purpose to question any such standards. Many of us do feel, as the present writer does, that while it is not for us to say that these things are under all circumstances inconsistent with the Christian profession, when they are considered in themselves, it is nevertheless so impossible to regard them apart from questions of association and example that the only course is to avoid them altogether. The mistake lies in thinking that any such list can be necessarily comprehensive. A man or woman may abstain from theatres and dancing, wines and spirits, cards and smoking, and may nevertheless be more worldly in heart than many of those who indulge to some degree in these practices.

In the midst of a world of appalling spiritual and physical destitution, what avails it to abstain from a series of such habits and practices, if the Christian's standard of living in more ordinary matters is no different from that of the openly worldly? In a world of appalling spiritual and physical destitution, why should not unnecessary motor-cars, and unnecessarily expensive holidays, be considered as worldly as theatres and dancing? Or, indeed, anything and everything which prevents our "detaching ourselves" from all that we have, for the sake of Christ and His needy ones? "Whoso hath this world's goods, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?" And if he has not the love of God abiding in him, it is because the love of the world is there, in some deadly, insidious form. The veriest "Puritan" (to adopt for a moment, and for the sake of vivid expression, the rather objectionable use of that term) may be a veritable Dives in his sumptuous faring day by day, and in heedless neglect of the poor and suffering, in matters literal or spiritual, at his gate or far away. Crumbs they may get: but what does *he* get?

Sweeping generalizations are of course absurd, and only tend to destroy their own object: but surely there is enough cause for heart-searching in all our lives! It is impossible to say that motor-cars, for example, are always an indulgence, or that an expensive holiday can in no case be a necessity. And many of those who seem to have all that the heart can desire in this life may be exercis-

ing more real self-denial than their critics, and may quite honestly, before God, believe they are able to serve Him best, for one reason or another, in their present manner of life. The true method is not to judge individuals (except ourselves), but *fashions*; and to point out the perils and disasters that spring from assuming that what everybody does, even what excellent Christians do, must be right. Associations and upbringing are too often taken as the norm of life, rather than the Word of God. It cannot be pretended that the common standard of living among even earnest Christians is the New Testament standard. And that is a deadly example of the effect, in a desperately needy world, of following a fashion of supposed discipleship which our Lord plainly says is no discipleship at all.

III

Our third illustration is one more obvious, perhaps, and more commonly mentioned, than any other. But we have just been provided with some telling examples of the results of fashion in this particular—the rule of fashion in matters of science and criticism. And here the blind following of the majority is the more unaccountable because of the frequent lessons that such fashions are utterly untrustworthy.

Take a case in point with reference to systems of philosophy. A Modernist Conference was held recently at Oxford; and a distinguished authority in such matters is reported to have said that “the philosophy of Spencer, Huxley, and others in their time was a queer mixture of subjectivism and mechanicism.” Quoting this utterance, a writer suggests that, forty years ago, Spencer had “the most exalted name among English *savants*”!

Again, all Biblical scholars know how the Tübingen school of New Testament criticism was utterly discredited and overthrown. And those who observe the signs of the times are prepared to believe that a similar fate awaits the present fashions in Old Testament criticism, at no very distant date—unwilling as its sponsors are to admit the discrediting of what to many of them has been the labour of a lifetime. How difficult they must find it to know what exactly to do with Professor Wilson, and Mr. Finn, and others whose “criticism” of their own literary edifices is “destructive” enough!

Yet it is surprising how the old confident assertions continue

to be made. There must be an end of it some day, of course. But apparently that is not yet. Only quite recently a little volume has been published, entitled *The Doctrine of the Infallible Book*, the author of almost the whole being Bishop Gore. He begins by assuming the main critical position as to the Old Testament. It is fair to recognize the limitations evidently imposed upon him by space, and by the specific object which he has in view—he is trying to show that such criticism causes no hindrance to faith. Yet he shows what a fuller treatment would be, by confidently summarizing the usual list of points about the Pentateuch, etc., etc., and even (after all that has lately been written on the subject) about Daniel. And the chapter which he himself recognizes as touching “the most important and weighty objection” to the critical view (viz., our Lord’s attitude towards the Old Testament) is partly occupied by a restatement of the usual critical devices for overcoming that objection, in which there is no sign of any recognition of the forcible replies that have been repeatedly made to those devices within the last few years of controversy. We need not question his own assertion of candour in facing the difficulty: but even if he himself is not influenced by current scholastic fashions to a degree of which he is quite unconscious, we may undoubtedly find in publications of such a character, especially when they are issued under such auspices (for the book is published by the Student Christian Movement), an alarming illustration of the peril to students and others which arises from the prevalence, for the time being, of fashions so widespread and so influentially backed.

Another example, almost at the moment of writing, is equally illuminating in a rather different way. *The Record* of October 16, 1924 (from which we have already gathered our illustration touching Spencer and Huxley), mentions a sermon by the Bishop of Birmingham in his Cathedral, in which, at the outset of his work in that city, he is stated to have taken occasion to reply to his critics. The Bishop, speaking of the Reformation Divines, is positively alleged to have said that when they used the term “God’s word,” they meant God’s revelation of Himself, primarily through Christ the Word of God, but also the revelation which He gave through the discoveries which He enabled man in all ages to make.

That perhaps does not profess to be an exact verbal report:

but presumably it represents the substance of what was said ; and in any case the main object of any such statement is evident, whatever its exact form. When we have recovered from our surprise, some of us may begin to wonder whether Bishop Barnes will next tell us that where the alleged "discoveries" of man contradict the written revelation of God (as it is notorious that he himself believes they do, in connexion with a doctrine distinctly taught by the Apostle Paul), the Reformation Divines always intended us to accept those discoveries as overriding the testimony of our Lord and His Apostles. Is that to be the next step in the interpretation of their meaning when they made the Word of God the touch-stone of all doctrine ?

Our latest illustration might be difficult to surpass, as an example of the logical consequences of following unproved scientific and literary fashions and presuppositions. Into what quagmires does it lead those who desert the solid ground upon which those Reformation Divines in reality lead us to take our stand !

As to those in peril of being swept off their feet by any of the tides of thought and custom which we have considered, our chief resource for helping them is prayer. And, for ourselves and them alike, the only safe refuge is "the impregnable rock of Holy Scripture." Many before our day, and in far more perilous conditions, have been called upon to adopt an unpopular line. Perhaps it is the very absence of personal peril at the moment, and the universal prevalence of suave speech (at any rate in conference), together with the strong tendency of the age to seek an outward appearance of unity, that make such a line more difficult resolutely to adopt, in the strength of the Lord, than it would have been under an attack more obvious and a peril more personal. We are not called upon to judge the motives of others ; but neither the fear of this unjustified charge, nor anything else, must keep the disciple from following the leading of his Lord in the three matters now considered, or in any other. Whatever the appearances, never was the call to unpopular decisions more urgent ; never was the response fraught with more far-reaching issues.

