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CONVERSION,

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ANY student of world affairs must be struck by the immense forces operating to-day on a world-wide scale, forces which are breaking up the existing social order, forces against which the ancient religions of the East such as Confucianism are powerless, forces which challenge the whole Christian position. Practically every country in the world reveals a breakaway from all organised religion, on the ground that it is no longer necessary to life. With it there has come an anti-God movement and a secular way of life which eliminates God from the universe.

I am not speaking of Russian Communism only but of a much wider movement which is visible in the west as well as the east and which cannot be ignored by any of us clergy, for it is invading every parish in England. Mr. H. G. Wells puts it thus: "Religion in the future can only be the service of humanity, detached from any belief in a personal God."

In England we see the breakdown of moral standards. The divorce courts are evidence of the growing paganism in our land. The past thirty years have witnessed new and marvellous changes, not the changes simply which are due to the visible forces of applied science but the changed mentality of a younger generation which will take nothing for granted, and which demands the investigation of all life. If Western moral standards are challenged, Christian ethics are none the less called in question and the demand is made for liberty to live a life that is free and unfettered by any religious restraints.

For these reasons the Church is facing a dangerous situation and every clergyman is feeling the pressure of it in his own parish. It is no longer enough to quote the Bible to those who challenge our faith, for they challenge the book as well as the faith. We are facing now a post-war civilisation which is material and critical, which claims to be disillusioned about our religious values, which regards the Church as a worn-out system with no message for this age. So serious is this situation for the future of Christianity we dare not sit at ease while the world is being captured by anti-religious forces. We have lost ground enough already because we have spent so much time in attacking one another instead of joining forces in the face of a common foe. As Church people we hold an entrenched position and we hide behind the parapets of tradition, privilege and class. But the challenge of the hour is for aggressive warfare, for the world has lost its moral balance, it is forsaking its spiritual heritage and is floundering on in a morass. It is vainly searching for a new centre of unity, and if religion it must have it seeks for a religion that is based on reality and experience. Have

we any answer to this challenge? Let us think carefully about it, for the contribution of the Church to the present world crisis will determine the attitude of thousands to Christ. Either we demonstrate the adequacy of the Gospel and the reality of Christ in human experience or we must cease to count as a serious factor in world life. The challenge is therefore for a Gospel which can meet this world of communism, secularism, race conflict, communal strife, international jealousies, national greed and selfishnesses, and meeting it, triumph by the inherent power and reality of the message we proclaim. This means a new discovery of the Gospel as able to produce moral character and thus give to the world a moral basis to life which to-day is largely lost; a Gospel that offers a spiritual experience of God and which answers the charge that religion is dope; a Gospel that carries with it the social implications of justice, freedom and righteousness; a Gospel that can meet men, enslaved by sin, burdened by guilt, and set them free; a Gospel which, while it is world-wide in its range, is nevertheless personal and individual.

I make no apology for introducing the subject of conversion in this seemingly roundabout way, because this background is the soil in which we are called upon to sow the Gospel seed. This situation is our world to-day, and with this in our mind may we ask what relationship the subject of conversion bears to it. I take it you would not wish me to treat conversion as something isolated from those other great religious words of our faith such as redemption, regeneration, repentance and faith.

Conversion in either its noun or verb form is a common enough word in both the Old and the New Testament. In Acts xv. 3 we read, "they passed through Samaria declaring the conversion of the Gentiles." The Apostles connected conversion with both repentance and faith. In Acts iii. 19 we read, "Repent and be converted," and in Acts xi. 21 we read, "A great number believed and turned to the Lord." We are given in these two verses the negative and the positive sides of conversion, the turning from evil and the turning to God. But conversion is much more than simply our turning to God. It involves our conception of God as one who pardoneth iniquity. It implies that, in turning, God meets us and brings into our lives something that was not there before. In other words, conversion represents the whole transaction of the soul in repentance and faith and the whole attitude of God revealed in Christ giving the penitent sinner His pardoning Grace and Peace. We are therefore concerned with nothing less than the coming of Christ into human lives, and any study of this subject must centre in Christ Himself. If He is but the ideal man and the perfect example our use of the word conversion will have little meaning. Ian Maclaren says in his book, *The Mind of the Master* :

"Religion with Jesus has a dynamic and it is Jesus Himself, for Jesus and religion are as soul and body. He did not evolve it as an intellectual conception. He exhibited it as a state of life. The religion of Jesus was in life before it appeared in the Gospels; it had been fulfilled

in Himself before it was preached to the world. Jesus never proposed that men should discuss His Gospel, He invited men to live it."

We are drawn in studying conversion to study Christ Himself, for conversion is surely the acceptance of Jesus Christ as Saviour, Redeemer, Lord and Master.

What bearing, you ask, has this on the great world affairs that loom so large in our modern life? It has this bearing, that all human life tends to Him or radiates from Him. As Liddon puts it :

"He is the point in which humanity finds its unity. He closes the early history of our race. He inaugurates its future. Nothing local, transient, individualizing, national, sectarian dwarfs the proportions of His world-embracing character."¹

Horace Bushnell gives us the same thought from another angle when he says :

"To Jesus alone, the simple Galilean Carpenter, it happens that never having seen a map of the world in His life or heard the names of half the great nations on it, He undertakes, coming out of His shop, a scheme as much vaster and more difficult than that of Alexander the Great, as it proposes more and what is more divinely benevolent."²

It is no exaggeration to say that the attractive power of Christianity is Christ alone. Napoleon on St. Helena is reported to have said to a friend, "Jesus Christ has succeeded in making every human soul an appendage of His own," and it was this attractive power of Christ which baffled the great Emperor. He presented Himself to the world not as a teacher of truth but as the Truth, not as a way of life but as the life itself, not as one of many ways to God but as the way. To quote once more, someone has said :

"Detach Christianity from Christ and it vanishes before your eyes into intellectual vapour, for it is of the essence of Christianity that day by day, hour by hour the Christian should live in conscious, felt and sustained relationship to the ever-living author of his creed and life. Christianity is non-existent apart from Christ. It radiates now as at the first from Christ."

If this is true of the faith as a whole it is equally true of that aspect of it where Christ enters first in human consciousness and experience. Detach Christ personally from the conversion of a soul, reduce conversion to a mere psychological process and its dynamic and moral force will evaporate and leave the sinner in as big a slough of despair as before. Conversion as I understand it is Christ coming into our lives in redemptive love, taking our natural gifts and talents and transmuting them into the pure gold of His Kingdom, working in us a moral regeneration whereby old habits, evils and passions are overcome and new spiritual life bursts forth in us, giving us that conscious and realised presence of God in daily life.

The classic example in the New Testament is St. Paul. No other conversion to Christ in the New Testament is related so

¹ Liddon's *Bampton Lectures*, p. 8.

² Bushnell, *Nature and the Supernatural*, p. 232.

fully. It is remarkable, because as far as the records go there is no gradual passage from the Jewish Synagogue to the Christian Church but a sudden and complete change of character, due, the Apostle tells us, to his having met personally the risen Christ on the Damascus road. Dr. Holtzmann in his book on the Acts says :

“ It is certain that the Apostle knows nothing of a gradual process which has drawn him closer to Christianity, but only of a sudden halt which he was compelled to make in the midst of an active career.”

St. Paul, writing from his prison in Rome, says : “ I was apprehended by Jesus Christ,” meaning “ taken possession of by Christ.”

The deciding factor in St. Paul's conversion, therefore, is the appearance of Christ to him. To the Apostle it was no subjective vision but an objective revelation of Christ which he classed with the appearances of Christ to the other disciples. Conversion to St. Paul was not merely the development of latent spiritual gifts within him but the coming of Christ into his life and the bringing to him of a life which was not there before. It was not a stirring of his religious impulses only but the experience of meeting face to face the Christ of God and of surrendering his life to Him. All through the Apostle's life he referred to this experience as something that had been the initiation into a new and divine fellowship which nothing could dim. Yet it was not something he could trace to a human source. The more his experience deepened the more truly he could say, “ By the Grace of God I am what I am.” The beginning of his Christian life was not found in Paul, nor in his inclinations, gropings, resolvings and prayers, but in Christ who met him in redeeming love. Ever since that day when on the Damascus road Christ seized this hard Jewish persecutor of the Church and converted him into an Apostle to the Gentiles—conversion through Christ has been the supremest of all human experiences. As Dr. Alexander White says :

“ There is such a Divine Hand in every conversion ; there is such a sovereignty in it, taking place within a man, there is at the same time such a mysteriousness about it ; and withal, such a transcendent importance, that there is nothing else that ever takes place on the face of the earth for one moment to be compared with a conversion.”

There are so many kinds of conversion that we theorise about the subject and forget the central fact. There are so many different occasions and circumstances of conversion, some sudden and unexpected, some gradual and slow, that we often fail to see the hand of God because other spiritual experiences are not the same as our own. People do not need to travel the Damascus road to find Christ, but the essential thing is that men must find Christ, and here there is one factor in conversion common to all experience—there is no conversion apart from Christ. No psychologist can produce it, no human will-power can work regeneration of soul. The lesson of St. Paul's conversion was not its suddenness, nor its circumstances, but simply that he met Christ and yielded

his life to Him. There is only one other conversion in the world more wonderful than St. Paul's and that is our own. We may never have had a cataclysmic change nor a sudden conversion, but we must know for ourselves the challenge of Christ in His purity, love and power to us. We must have an experience of His redemptive power and His abiding presence if our ministry is to be fruitful to others.

Looking again at our biggest parochial problems to-day I think most will agree that they are moral rather than intellectual, and that to regain the spiritual men must face up to the fact of sin. Dr. Jowett brings this out very clearly. He says :

"Do not let us attempt to deceive ourselves. Sin is most real, guilt is most real, bondage is most real. How can we obtain deliverance? I want deliverance from the baleful shore of guilt. I want deliverance from the power of acquired habit. Where can the liberating power be found? I turn to those who have closed the Bible, denouncing its remedies as fictional, or at the best as antique and obsolete, and I ask them what provision they are prepared to put in its place. The problem is this. Here is a man, guilt-bound, sin-bound, death-bound. Release him. Take that haunted chamber of the mind, lay the ghosts and make the chamber into a quiet and peaceful living-room. Take the heart and turn out the unclean devils of desire and lust and tenant it with the white-robed angels of faith and hope and love. Take the evil power out of to-day and take the black threat out of to-morrow. This is the problem often underestimated because the remedies offered are peddling and insufficient."

Dr. Jowett is right ; we speak of sin to-day as though it were a skin complaint instead of a disease of the heart. Polish and culture are quite consistent with uncleanness and depravity.

"When education and culture have reached their utmost limits and the mental powers are refined into exquisite discernment, the two black gruesome birds of the night remain—guilt and death, and only the Eternal Son can disturb them and cause them to flee away."

Here then lies our task. Do we shrink from it? It was our Lord's task. He spent most of His ministry in helping sin-burdened souls into the light of God, and to Him the moral corruption in the world was the foe to be fought. He challenged the lives of Pharisees and rulers, of publicans and sinners, because there could be no true conversion without a moral cleansing. Do we regard this as something narrow and individualistic? Study the work of the Evangelical revival and you will see how the great reforms of the early nineteenth century such as the abolition of slavery, the better industrial conditions and the growth of social service in England were initiated and carried through by men whose lives had been inflamed with divine love, who having found Christ for themselves wanted to share Him with others.

Do we regard this task of conversion as something suitable to certain types of people? Study the history of any foreign missionary society for the answer. The C.M.S. sprang out of the Evangelical revival and for 132 years it has been proving in many countries, among diverse races and religions, that Christ can meet human needs in all countries and in every age. There is coming

home from India, China, Japan, Africa and elsewhere a mass of evidence to prove that a pagan African, a cultured Chinese, a practical Japanese and a mystical Indian can all find peace through the blood of the Cross.

The Gospel has been tested in this past hundred years in many countries and it is now a fact of experience that wherever men of any race are brought face to face with Jesus Christ and surrender to Him, He works in them a mighty social and spiritual regeneration which affects the man's character, gives a new home life and leads the way to nation-wide social uplift.

Because of our ecclesiastical system, are we taking our people for granted? Because they have been baptised and confirmed, do we regard their conversion as unnecessary? We ought perhaps to remind ourselves that every generation needs converting, and that the root problem in our Church life to-day is that many Church members have never entered into a conscious experience of Jesus Christ in His saving and delivering power; in consequence the witness of the Church is blunted. Through a lack of vital spiritual experience within our ranks the world invades the Church, whereas in Apostolic days it was the Church that invaded and challenged the world.

Because of our Evangelical heritage, are we taking the Gospel for granted and thus stereotyping a message which ought to be pulsing with life and carrying with it a transforming power? We may be preaching sound Gospel sermons, yet our message may be but a pathetic survival of a lost experience. Judgment must begin with the House of God, it must begin with us. A rediscovery of the Gospel means first and foremost a new spiritual power in us, transforming our own lives and producing in us that quality of life which will attract others to Christ. Evangelicals sometimes speak as though they had a monopoly of the Gospel. The lesson of Church history is that where a Church is unfaithful to its trust God removes the candlestick and gives it to another. We have been placed in trust with the Gospel, and in these days of crisis and trouble we are being called upon again to give our witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to give it in the power of the Holy Spirit, that those who are seeking for deliverance may find Christ still able to save to the uttermost.

A Missionary writing home said:

"For several years with blunted pencil and awkward hand I tried to draw upon the Arab heart my conceptions, *my* theology, my creed, and I wondered at *God's* failure. One day a proud and fanatical Mullah came to debate with me. I was weary in body and distressed in mind, so I took the Gospel of St. John and read to him the story of Nicodemus, without comment, and at last the story of the crucifixion. When I raised my eyes again tears were in the Mullah's eyes. His blatant defiance had gone and he asked me for a copy of the Gospel so that he might study it."

This Missionary's experience must find an echo in many of our lives. We have tried in our own blundering way to meet this post-war world with social schemes, philosophical treatises and

psychological explanations, and the world has listened in a listless and cold manner, untouched and unstirred. St. Paul says: "I was apprehended by Christ." The secret of our success will be in finding what Paul found in Christ and in witnessing to Him. At a conference I attended a Missionary, in trying to explain his aims, said: "We are not sent to preach sociology but salvation, not economics but evangelism, not reform but redemption, not culture but conversion, not progress but pardon, not a new social order but a new birth, not revolution but regeneration, not a new organisation but a new creation, not democracy but the Gospel, not civilisation but Christ. We are ambassadors not diplomatists."

In these days, faced with such problems as we have been dealing with, is there not in our witness to the Gospel a note of urgency? Can we afford in these days to occupy so much of our time with secondary things when the world is hurrying on in a blind and bewildered race, losing its way, seeking for help and finding none? Can we not strike afresh the note of Christ triumphant, adequate through His Cross and passion, through His resurrection and ascension, to meet the needs of this perplexed and baffled age?

THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND AND HER REFORMATIONS. By William Howard-Flanders. [xi + 256 pp.] *Heath Cranton Ltd.* 10s. 6d. net.

It is difficult to understand what is the purpose of this book. The title is decidedly a misnomer unless "reformations" is used in a very loose sense. Indeed, nothing about the book is carefully done. While claim is made that it is the result of patient research, six authorities only are cited and some of these can hardly be called authorities.

Unfortunately the book is still further handicapped by careless arrangement. Wolsey, dead and disposed of, is resuscitated several times. The proof-reading has been badly done. Katharine of Aragon lives until 1636. The Barony of Dudley is stated to be still in abeyance, whereas it was revived several years ago. The sentences are long and involved. It surely is not necessary to extend sentences over fourteen or fifteen lines. It certainly does not make for easy reading. It is doubtful too whether some of the words used are to be found in any ordinary dictionary. Where does "abbotcy" come from? It is not a necessary word.

We think Mr. Howard-Flanders' time, quite obviously generously given in the writing of this book, might have been used to better effect if he had selected one limited period and dived more deeply into causes and events.

F. B.