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THE DUTY OF RELIGIOUS CONFERENCE

In 1745, "the year of the Prince", as the Gaelic people still call it, there was published in Edinburgh a little pamphlet entitled *Treatise on Religious Conference*. It was written by John Balfour, minister of Nigg in Ross-shire. There is good reason to believe that the spiritually discerning valued it at its true worth, for it was sponsored by five men who had won a reputation for their Evangelical zeal in their day. One of them was James Robe, who is well known as the publicist of the Cambuslang and Kilsyth revivals. The author, too, though this pamphlet is his only claim to literary distinction, was widely honoured as a man upon whose pastoral labours the blessing of God had manifestly rested. I cannot say to what extent the little book became a manual of religious practice even in that stronghold of Evangelical religion, Easter Ross, but it is certain that the technique of spiritual training which it enjoins was widely, indeed generally, accepted in the Evangelical parishes of the North of Scotland. Its influence is well marked on the living religion of the Highland people to this day. It may therefore be well worth while to give due heed to a spiritual wisdom which has proved its worth in the lives of multitudes of earnest and deeply exercised Christian people.

There is, of course, no novelty in the practice of conference as a method of fostering the spiritual life. In our own generation, it has been widely adopted. In fact, it has been used as a solvent for most of the problems which confront the Church. Conferences dealing with many or most aspects of the moral and spiritual life have been a feature of the Church life of our time. They all, however, have two features which seriously limit their usefulness. Their members, having conferred, separate, never, probably, to see each other again. They lack organic unity. Again, the common theme which occupies their attention is almost always a specific practical problem, such as Christian education, ecclesiastical unity, the world mission of the Church, and so forth. The "experimental divinity" which was the subject-matter of the Highland Evangelical Fathers when they met in religious conference had little practical reference. It was concerned supremely with the culture of the soul. But just because it searched so

delicately into the mysterious encounter of the grace of God with the penitent sinner, it bore rich and goodly fruit. Men were instructed to know the workings of their own hearts, and to recognise the promptings of the Holy Spirit. They were not ashamed to believe that their chief duty as Christians was to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling. Doubtless, this involved the risk of an undue self-concern, but have we, whose eyes, like those of Solomon's fool, are so often "in the ends of the earth", successfully overcome the temptation to cultivate our neighbour's garden and to neglect our own? Few would care to deny that the modern Church, in most of her branches, is more concerned with "good works" both at home and abroad than were those Highland Evangelicals whose spiritual methods of soul cultivation are the theme of this paper; but is there not a well-founded suspicion that behind this impressive façade of Christian activity there is a disturbing spiritual vacuum? To fill that vacuum with a rich, solid, and intelligently understood "experimental" religion is one of the most urgent needs of our time. To that end, John Balfour's little book, which bears the apt and revealing motto, "Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another: and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name" (Mal. iii. 16), might well make a worthy contribution.

Though Balfour was, in his day, a famed evangelist, he is not, in this reference, concerned with mass evangelism. Rather the contrary. His interest is in "them that feared the Lord", the spiritual élite. In his reckoning, the health of the Christian community largely depended on the spiritual vitality of this cell. Unless "they that feared the Lord" created an inner fellowship in each congregation and parish, they would be unable to comfort, counsel, and encourage each other. Knit together as a continuing fellowship, they were enabled not only to explore the deeper reaches of the spiritual life, but to challenge the careless and the worldly with a corporate standard of religious attainment which they would be compelled to respect. Hence, in those Highland fellowships for religious conference which conformed to the Balfour tradition, membership was straitly restricted to those whose fitness, after due examination, was conceded.

In a sense, of course, there is nothing new here. The innumerable praying societies which sprang up in the Lowlands

of Scotland after 1638 were fellowships for prayer and conference. They closely guarded the privilege of admission to membership, and their ostensible object was the culture of the spiritual life. The Highland tradition, of which Balfour is the exponent, differed, however, in several significant respects from seventeenth-century Lowland practice. The Highland fellowship society was almost always a function of normal congregational life. It never threatened to become a rival to the Church. It was not concerned with political issues, nor, at first anyway, with ecclesiastical controversy. The subjects of conference which Balfour recommends are a sufficient warrant for concluding that the eyes of members of Highland fellowship meetings were directed, not to the periphery, but to central interests of the spiritual life.

What shall Christians speak about when they are met together for the purpose of spiritual conference? Balfour answers with a noble simplicity: "In general, God and the discoveries He makes of His glorious name". With their eyes firmly fixed upon this theme, they may then proceed to discourse about God's dealings with them in various dispensations of His Providence towards them. In this reference, providential occurrences which have come within the experience or knowledge of members may be used as comforting illustrations of God's gracious dealings with His people. Specific answers to prayer come within the same category. It is, however, when he comes to the endlessly varied problems of the interior life that Balfour and the Highland Evangelicals for whom he speaks differ most profoundly from the practice of our day. "Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what God hath done for my soul" (Ps. lxxvi. 16). Following this example, Christians should be encouraged to tell how they have been awakened from sin, what means were blessed to bring this about, and what relief and enlargement they had in conversion, and what progress in sanctification. The temptations under which they have agonised, the relief and support vouchsafed to them in these experiences, the turns and vicissitudes of light and darkness, liberty and bondage, the healing and refreshment which they found in God's Word and in the worship of His house, along with the straits and enlargements of their spiritual condition, may form rich themes of conference.

Psalmist and Apostle do not hesitate to use their own spiritual

conflicts to illustrate the greatness of human need and the wonder of God's grace. Men of the world glory in accounts of secular warfare. Why should the Christian hesitate to recount the course and progress of their spiritual warfare, the good fight of faith, which is of infinitely greater consequence than the most decisive battles of this world?

Sensible modern Christians will, of course, be quick to point out the perils of excessive spiritual introspection, of the soul turning in upon itself in egotistic self-absorption. In their eager interest in "the condition of the soul" (*cor an anima*), the Highland Evangelicals who for generations practised Balfour's precepts did not escape that pitfall; but it may be reasonably argued that the dumb Christian who regards any reference to inward "frames and feelings" as evidence of bad taste or spiritual presumption is running an even greater risk. Is it not true that a temptation described is a real step towards its mastery? And that an experience of doubt or desolation is on the way to being overcome when it is clothed in words? Do not the spiritual apprehensions which dawn, often inchoately, upon the soul become more surely an abiding possession when they are set forth in words? Let the risk of undue subjectivism be acknowledged; but let us also confess that the modern reluctance to discuss the many-sided problems of the interior life is more often the result of an evasive lethargy than of a spiritual modesty. It is time that the "dumb spirit" be cast out of the Evangelical fellowship; and it is apparent that the large-scale religious conference, preoccupied with specific practical problems, is no substitute for the smaller and more intimate fellowship which would, at the same time, be a normal function of congregational life and give scope to the average seriously concerned Christian to confer with his fellows on the deeper and more intimate problems of the faith.

The counsels which Balfour offers for the wise conduct of religious conference have an abiding validity. Whether it be in the informal converse of a few like-minded friends, or in the more formal setting of a modern discussion group, it is well to remember that "we are to set about it (religious conference) in the fear of the Lord, and as accountable to Him for every word spoken". Likewise, "whether we learn of others, or instruct them, a meek and lowly temper is necessary". Especially in the case of those who become acknowledged leaders of such groups

is it essential to be "the more watchful against all temptations to pride and self-conceit, as well as neglect and contempt of others of inferior gifts". The more I discover, in the course of my pastoral duties, the often pathetically elementary grounding of many well-intentioned Church people in the rudiments of Christian faith and life, the more I am convinced that John Balfour has a saving word to our generation. When, by the help of God, the "dumb spirit" is cast out, men will edify themselves and others by speaking of those things which they have seen and heard.

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