

Preliminary Reflections

by Randolph S. Foster

The sermon emphasizes the importance of recognizing and pursuing the full privileges of faith to enhance Christian experience and fulfill the Church's mission.

Scripture: Isaiah 55:1, Matthew 13:46, Ephesians 3:20, Philippians 3:13, Hebrews 11:6

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Christian Perfection"

Description

Randolph Sinks Foster preaches about the utmost privilege offered to faith in spiritual healing and holy experience, emphasizing the correlation between privilege and duty. He highlights the importance of understanding the value and extent of blessings in Christ to stimulate pursuit and guide in the acquisition of spiritual treasures. Foster urges Christians to rise to a higher, purer experience of Christianity, emphasizing the need for deeper piety, stronger faith, and larger views to advance the Church's mission. He encourages believers to seek divine spiritual perfection and spread Scriptural holiness over all lands, promoting the great cause of holiness in the earth.

Transcript

A main object of the present volume is to gain the thoughtful attention of Christian minds (other will not be interested) to the question, What is the utmost privilege offered to faith as to spiritual healing and holy experience now, and to its answer?

The question of privilege involves, of course, the correlative question of duty. In discussing fully the one, we necessarily fix the limits of the other. The utmost contents of the privilege of faith marks the boundary of the duty of faith. The believer is under obligation to possess all, to the last degree, of that which he may possess in Christ. Present possibility of holiness determines present duty of holiness.

The question, therefore, proposed for discussion is one of great practical importance. It stands related intimately to the dearest welfare of the soul; it concerns the highest interests of the kingdom of Christ. Its correct answer or otherwise must to a large extent shape and fashion Christian experience and practice. It is impossible that it should be too earnestly pondered. The answer which it shall receive in the Christian consciousness carries in it that which will go far to determine what the Christian status shall be -- whether the piety of the Church shall be deep, earnest, Christful, or superficial, sickly, and earthy.

"The things which are seen" attract us. A dewdrop sparkling on the rose-tree awakens more admiration than the priceless ingot which may be concealed amid its roots. The unknown cannot move us. The

Master tells of a man "who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it" (Matt. 13:46); and of "treasure hid in a field, the which when a man hath found he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath and buyeth that field" (Matt. 13:44). It was not until after the pearl and treasure were discovered, and their great value known, that desires were awakened and sacrifices made for their attainment.

If the blessings of the Gospel were unconditionally without any agency of ours they were designed to be conferred upon us -- we might in that case remain contentedly ignorant of our privilege until we should find ourselves rejoicing in possession; but if, on the other hand, there are riches to be sought before obtained, blessings to be specifically solicited before given, how manifestly important that we know the value of the treasure, its nature and extent, as well as the mode of its acquisition, that we may be stimulated to the pursuit and guided in its method! If one knew that his domain embraced a mine of gold containing a million pounds, how much would he value it -- how diligently would he seek the imbedded treasure! If he supposed it contained no such wealth, it would be comparatively valueless in his eyes, and he would die without exertion. In exact proportion as the blessings of the Gospel are valuable, therefore, is it desirable that we clearly apprehend and definitely conceive them. At the present time particularly, when the mind of the Church is turned, with more than usual interest, to the subject of Christian privilege, and when the hearts of thousands in Christendom are peculiarly awake to it -- when inquiry is abroad, and action is assuming form and direction -- it becomes of deeper and wider consequence than ever before.

To say that the Church is now living, and from the time of the beginning has been living, beneath her privilege, below her mission, would certainly be but a mild and moderate though humiliating utterance of the conviction of Christendom. She has not entered upon her full heritage. She has consciously and knowingly left much land to be possessed. What is true of the aggregate of believers is mournfully true of almost each soul in the communion of Christ's body. Individual Christians have fallen below the standard. But few exceptions, comparatively, could in truth or charity be made. Only one in a multitude, with mightier impulse and greater faith than his fellows, has nobly dared to brook the difficulties, and go up to the possession of the entire promise. These stand as so many examples of the power of faith amid surrounding sterility and desolation, and at the same time are inspiring witnesses to the Church of her privilege, and reproof admonitors of her inexcusable shortcoming.

There may have been, and doubtless has been, on the part of most Christians, a vague and indefinite idea of greater blessings, not yet included in their experience, and a general outgoing of heart after them; but there has been so much indefiniteness and vagueness on the subject of privilege and duty as to awaken neither hope nor concern; and if in some instances aspirations, and even great and distressing convictions, have been awakened .for a time, they have too often perished for want of guidance and support. No earnest Christian, I am persuaded, will dissent from these lamentable statements. They are not morbid. They are not made in a carping or faultfinding spirit. They are simply the record of a sad fact which has filled the heart of Christ and of his Church with sorrow through all the ages of Christian history.

"The actual state of education, morals and happiness in a community may be regarded as the true expression of the power of the moral and intellectual forces engaged for its improvement. The efficiency and usefulness of a Church, for instance, are precisely what the zeal, purity, and intelligence of its members can make it. We may conclude, therefore that the Christian enterprises of the present time must remain stationary, without some new accession of moral resources. If the rising generation shall come forward with only . the same degree of piety and intelligence that belong to their fathers, then the utmost that can be expected is, that the cause of religion and humanity shall not retrograde. Progress, under the

circumstances supposed, is wholly out of the question. The Church is now barely able to hold its ground against the opposing forces of sin and error, or to advance with a tardy step to future triumphs; and if it is to be recruited and reinforced by such members and ministers only as already wield its destinies, it must remain in essentially the same condition, while the accession of even a few persons of deeper piety, and stronger faith, and larger views, might sweep away the obstacles that retard its progress, and open a career of unexampled success. A single individual of enlarged conceptions of duty and burning zeal for Christ, is sometimes able to communicate new spirit to a whole Church which has for years scarcely given a sign of vitality. It had just enough of moral power to maintain a bare existence, and resist the pressure from without; and now the additional impetus given by one true man of God puts every thing in motion and triumphs over obstacles. What victories then might we not anticipate, what enlargement for Zion, could the whole Christian host be induced to gird themselves with strength, and enter upon the whitening field to which they are called with something like the spirit of primitive Christianity? It would be as new life from the dead. It would be as the birth of a new dispensation. They who are ready to perish would revive again, and all the islands of the sea would rejoice" (Olin's Lectures).

We may erect churches, found charities, educate ministers, employ missionaries, print Bibles, extend far and wide all these and a thousand other appliances for the good and redemption of the race; but, though we may do incalculable good by such means, we shall fail painfully short of the glorious mission of Christianity, if we fail ourselves to see, and if we fail to make the world see, that sublime, yea, divine spiritual perfection she places . within the reach of, and' holds out in invitation to, all. Christianity possesses inferior and superior blessings; it may exist in inferior and superior degrees of development. What the world wants, what the Church wants, is Christianity in all its fullness: then, and not till then, "shall the wilderness and the solitary place be glad, and the desert rejoice and blossom as the rose." Let it not be inferred that we depreciate the ordinary but genuine experience of the Church, the common grade of Christian grace; we certainly do not, but allowing it to be all that can in

Justice be claimed for it. we only say it is not equal either to our needs or privilege: there are still greater blessings in store for us. The time has come when we need to ascend, to press up to a higher, healthier, and purer experience -- from the inferior to the superior walks.

It may be proper further and more explicitly to state here, that it is no part of our object to present a new theory, not even an improvement or essential modification of an old one; but simply to educe, in somewhat different form, what has been exhibited by others from time to time. Gaining this, we shall have accomplished our highest aim. They, therefore, who seek for novel and startling speculations, who find pleasure only in the adventurous and rash, who delight to see the ancient and respectable torn ruthlessly away to make place for the unfledged and irresponsible, need expect no entertainment in the following pages. For such minds we have no fancy to write. But to the candid and truth-seeking and truth-loving, to the serious and thoughtful, who value truth more than singularity, we submit this, our humble effort to do good, hoping that they will find both entertainment and profit in its perusal. A word to such, and we proceed directly to our work. We are all liable, in regard to every subject, to be unduly influenced by prejudice, swayed by pre-conceptions arising from habit, constitution, education, association, and other causes. The blinding influence of these is obvious, all around us and within us, every hour. How great the heroism and preeminent the moral courage which completely exercises and casts them out of the mind! How indispensable to the highest success that this be done! No one can properly investigate a subject, or even successfully examine the researches of another, until his mind shall be so enamored of the truth as to be willing to follow whithersoever she leads.

With regard to the particular subject considered in the following pages, it may be that some of our readers, from the influence of causes unknown, have imbibed prejudices exerting an undetected but fatal power upon their whole religious character and progress; blinding them to privilege and restraining them from duty; limiting their usefulness and diminishing their enjoyments! Is it so? Will the reader make inquisition, and with a noble, Christian sincerity, worthy of himself and worthy of the magnitude of the truth involved, give himself to its discovery and open his heart to its divine impression?

It is the desire of the author in the preparation of this work, to promote the great cause of holiness in the earth, believing that he who does this is a permanent benefactor of his race. And remembering that God's children are scattered throughout the entire Church, in all the denominational divisions, it will be his effort to avoid all allusions having a tendency to inflict needless pain upon any, and at the same time to assist all in the glorious work of their common mission -- the building up of Christ's kingdom in the world, "and spreading Scriptural holiness over all lands." We shall, indeed, give our views fully and undisguisedly, but without entering at all into merely sectarian contentions, or attempting to secure denominational ends. We write for Christians, without respect to name, with no thought whatever of their peculiar badge, and with no desire to affect their particular relations, but purely to assist them in the great matter of Christian experience. Here we have a common interest, and may, without infringing personal or denominational rights, be "coworkers together," advising, comforting, reproving, and exhorting each other, and so "provoking each other to love and good works."

The subject upon which we are about to enter is quite as ample as important. To unfold it fully in all its connections, would require elaborate preliminary discussions -- discussions embracing a wide range of topics, and reaching downward to the very foundations of theology. However this might accord with our personal preferences, or please a portion of our readers, we are quite sure it would defeat our cardinal object, which is to do the greatest good to the greatest number. We must, therefore, content ourselves and indulge our friends with a direct and restricted treatise -- a simple monograph. The same consideration will likewise modify our style and mode. Aiming mainly at a practical result, we shall not seek either to be learnedly critical or rigidly systematic. Rather, it will be our effort to render what, to many minds, is perplexed and mystified, plain and intelligible; referring, as occasion may require, both to the word of God, which is religion in teaching, and to Christian experience, which is religion in practice, for the illustration and corroboration of our views. This is what the mass of Christian minds want; not speculation, not philosophy, but simply practical Gospel truth, so presented as to interest the understanding and move the heart -- privilege unfolded and duty enforced!

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