

OLD TRUTH

William Shakespeare, with his usual charm, counseled us to find "books in running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything." Don't ask me which play, for remembering that is no game, but neither is life itself, which is why I have at least remembered the bard's advice.

The trouble is that truth, like beauty, is often in the eye of the beholder. You remember Thomas Aquinas warned us that if a donkey looked into a book you could not rightly expect an angel to look out. A much higher Authority said only the pure in heart could "see God," and he said that to a large group of materialistic peasants who were looking at God without knowing it.

On the other hand, some truths are so close to being axiomatic that even when we feel most dull-witted they stand out, perhaps even shriek out. Take the last place some would look for truth — fairy tales. I say "some" for very wise people have always known that every good story is a commentary on life, even those of Hans Andersen or Aesop.

Discouraging Fairy Tales!

Well, take the story of Cinderella. We all know about those ugly, selfish sisters (so much like ourselves), and we all remember how very beautiful Cinderella was (she was what we would like others to think we are), and then there was the Prince. Who could forget how rich he was? And I don't need a parenthesis about that.

Anyway, it does not take a Shakespeare to find the sermons in Cinderella. Here are some of them: there are such realities as good and evil. Good is better than evil. Good is rewarded and evil is punished — for Cinderella got the prince and the sisters got the pip.

But, now comes the crunch. Those truths, specially the last one, are not entirely encouraging. My track record has never been good. I have always **known** much better than I have **done**. I am not what I should be, could be, or would be. Indeed, at times, I have confessed with that character in one of H.G. Well's books: "I'm not a man, but a mess." Or in the words of another: "He's not a man, he's a walking civil war." How encouraged I was to find that even Luther felt like that, and Charles Spurgeon, and best of all, Paul the apostle.



Dr. Desmond Ford, scholar and evangelist with Good News Unlimited, here gives his personal testimony to the gospel. As the title suggests, the thoughts are as old as the gospel itself, but what a joy to reflect on these themes again!

What does one do? Throwing in the sponge means the game's up. I don't want it to be up. But if evil is punished, and I've been responsible for lots of that, and while good is to be rewarded I've done very little of that — perhaps none, for selfishness has tainted all — is there only despair?

The Answer

I'm glad someone shouted that word "gospel." Maybe even Christians, like other people, forget those things most vital to them. Perhaps even the redeemed sometimes take divine love for granted as with married or filial love. Luther said he had to learn the gospel afresh every day because legalism was like an oil in his bones. And if that was true for Luther. . . .

Of course, we know that today all sorts of theological issues are apopping. There's prophecy, and there's the nature of Christ, there's the judgment, etc. But there's really only one thing needful, absolutely needful. That's as true now, or more so, as when Jesus said it to Mary. So let me say again some things I have to remind myself every day. Maybe you need them too.

The good news assures me that if I have given myself to Christ I am perfectly his child, though not a perfect child. While I am a sinner in myself all my days, in Christ I have perfect righteousness, for "this man [Jesus] receiveth sinners."

Christ's Perfection — For Us

The more I behold Christ's perfect embodiment of infinite love and truth exemplified in his every motive, thought, look, word, and deed, the more my conscience would be vexed did I not also believe that his personal righteousness is imputed every moment to this foolish, erring, weak, stumbling believer (Jn 1:9; 13:10; 17:6). Similarly, the more I perceive of the depths of the sacred law which demands of me all that Christ was and did in his humanity, the more I would despair did not Scripture assure me that all who have surrendered their lives to the Savior are "accepted in the beloved," "complete in him," "cleansed from all unrighteousness," and without "condemnation" or "separation" (Eph 1:6; Col 2:10; 1 Jn 1:9; Rom 8:1, 33-39).

Despite the fact that we strive to fulfill every known duty we remain "unprofitable servants," righteous only by faith in the merits of Christ, "for we all make many mistakes" and must daily pray "forgive us our trespasses" (Jas 3:2; Mt 6:12; Rom 3:20-26). In other words, the good news assures me that if I have given myself to Christ I am perfectly his child, though not a

That Is Ever New

Desmond Ford

7

perfect child (Heb 12:5-7; Jn 13:1). While I am a sinner in myself all my days, in Christ I have perfect righteousness, for "this man [Jesus] receiveth sinners," and God is One who justifies the ungodly who believe (Mt 7:11; Lk 13:3; Rom 5:4).

Sin Remains but Doesn't Damn

While at every advance step in my Christian experience my penitence will deepen, and I will make the apostle's confession my own, "I know that in me...there dwelleth no good thing," and my prayers will urgently ascend that the Savior might heal the disorders of my sin-sick soul, simultaneously I will rejoice that Christ is made unto me righteousness, sanctification, wisdom, and redemption, and that I can never be lost while I trust in his merits (1 Cor 1:31; Heb 13:7; Rev 8:1-4; Zec 3:1-5; Mt 18:21, 22).

Furthermore, while sin remains in me and ever easily besets me, it shall not reign, for once I learn that my standing before God is determined by divine grace "regardless of my success in keeping the law" (Rom 3:28 NEB), then sin ceases to have dominion over me (Rom 6:14). The tenor of my life is heavenward, despite manifold inconsistencies and failures. Being now united with Christ by faith, the fruit of righteousness is spontaneous (Rom 7:4). For it is not possible for me to accept Christ's death without also accepting his resurrection life (Rom 6:1-12).

Objections

Paul declares that the two typical objections to the true gospel are invalid for the believer. I cannot accept the work of the second member of the Godhead and reject that of the third (Rom 3:31; 6:1-3). God gives his gifts with two hands, and justifies no man whom he does not proceed to sanctify. Thus there will be no separation between justification and sanctification in my experience, but there will be distinction, for the first is complete and perfect, but the latter being the work of a lifetime, is neither complete nor perfect (Compare Heb 1:3; Jn 19:30; Col 2:11-15 with 1 Cor 9:27; Gal 5:17, 1 Jn 1:8).

Thus in every place where Paul mentions "the righteousness which is of faith" he means not sanctification, but that justification which is based on the finished atonement. Justification means a declaring righteous, never making righteous in the sense of infusion of character (Rom 1:16, 17; 3:21-24; 4:11, 13; 5:17, 18; 9:30-10:13; Gal 5:6; Php 3:9). For justification is both instantaneous and one hundred per cent, but it is not so with character development. The imputation of righteousness in justification is not a legal fiction, for when Christ died as the representative of the race, then "all died" (2 Cor 5:14), and when he rose, all rose (Col 3:1; Eph 2:6). God

declares me not subjectively righteous but forensically (legally) so. Justification has to do with my standing, not my state.

The Gospel's Implications

Believing this good news that my acceptance with Christ is conditional on his perfection and not mine, I am free to work for others without feeling hypocritical concerning my own inadequacies and failures. Only this gospel offers a message for others which will inspire faith, hope, and love, thus bringing that quality of life which all perfectionism strives in vain to accomplish. Is not this the approach of the New Testament, which, while sketching the many infirmities of the early believers, encourages them to fight the fight of faith with the assurance of an ultimate abundant entrance into heaven?

This everlasting gospel, the faith once-for-all given to the saints, is the theme which has inspired all revivals, and should prevail in Christian preaching, swallowing up all other themes.

The New Testament offers many verbal pictures of the gospel which characterize the new age ushered in by the cross of Christ. These figures include ransom, reconciliation, atonement, adoption, justification, etc. The reality always transcends the figure, and the fact that justification is a legal metaphor does not imply that acceptance with God is merely a bookkeeping transaction. The gift of the indwelling Spirit and the event of regeneration ever accompany saving faith.

But the legal metaphor — justification — is valuable as enabling those aware of their pollution of soul to depend upon a perfect righteousness which was wrought out 2000 years ago and offered today as a free gift immediately available to all who will accept it. This outward and upward look accomplishes a thousand-fold more than all sanctified spiritual navel-watching could, for it lays the glory of man in the dust and does for him what he could never do for himself. The Spirit of holiness does not speak of himself but testifies of Christ alone and his righteousness, and so should we.

This everlasting gospel, the faith once-for-all given to the saints, is the theme which has inspired all revivals, and should ever prevail in Christian preaching, swallowing up all other themes. It is the last hope for a hopeless world (Jude 3; Mt 24:14; Rev 14:6; 1 Cor 2:2; Gal 6:14; 1 Cor 15:3 RSV). Far from being a newfangled heresy, it is the very gospel foretold in Genesis 3:15, and cherished by prophets, apostles, martyrs, reformers, and the greatest evangelists of all ages. □