

Grand defect.—Neglect of the peculiar Doctrines of Christianity.

But the grand radical defect in the practical system of these nominal Christians, is their forgetfulness of all the peculiar doctrines of the Religion which they profess—the corruption of human nature—the atonement of the Saviour—and the sanctifying influence of the Holy Spirit.

Here then we come again to the grand distinction between the Religion of Christ and that of the bulk of nominal Christians in the present day. The point is of the utmost *practical importance*, and we would therefore trace it into its actual effects.

There are, it is to be apprehended, not a few, who having been for some time hurried down the stream of dissipation in the indulgence of all

their natural appetites (except perhaps that they were restrained from very gross vice by a regard to character, or by the yet unsubdued voice of conscience) and who, having all the while thought little, or scarce at all, about Religion, “living,” to use the emphatical language of Scripture, “without God in the world,” become in some degree impressed with a sense of the infinite importance of Religion. A fit of sickness, perhaps, or the loss of some friend or much loved relative, or some other stroke of adverse fortune, damps their spirits, awakens them to a practical conviction of the precariousness of all human things, and turns them to seek for some more stable foundation of happiness than this world can afford. Looking into themselves ever so little, they become sensible that they must have offended God. They resolve accordingly to set about the work of reformation.—Here it is that we shall recognize the fatal effects of the prevailing ignorance of the real nature of Christianity, and the general forgetfulness of its grand peculiarities. These men *wish* to reform, but they know neither the real *nature* of their distemper nor its true remedy. They are aware, indeed, that they must cease to do evil, and learn to do well; that they must relinquish their habits of vice, and attend more or less to the duties of Religion; but having no conception of the actual malignity of the disease under which they labour, or of the perfect cure which the Gospel has provided for it, or of the manner in which that cure is to be effected,

“They do but skin and film the ulcerous place,
While rank corruption, mining all within,
Infects unseen.”

It often happens therefore but too naturally in this case, that where they do not soon desist from their attempt at reformation, and relapse into their old habits of sin, they take up with a partial and scanty amendment, and fondly flatter themselves that it is a thorough change. They now conceive that they have a right to take to themselves the comforts of Christianity. Not being able to raise their practice up to their standard of right, they lower their standard to their practice; they sit down for life contented with their present attainments, beguiled by the complacencies of their own minds, and by the favourable testimony of surrounding friends; and it often happens, particularly where there is any degree of strictness in formal and ceremonial observances, that there are no people more jealous of their character for Religion.

Others perhaps go farther than this. The dread of the wrath to come has sunk deeper into their hearts; and for a while they strive with all their might to resist their evil propensities, and to walk without stumbling in the path of duty. Again and again they resolve; again and again they

break their resolutions. All their endeavours are foiled, and they become more and more convinced of their own moral weakness, and of the strength of their indwelling corruption. Thus groaning under the enslaving power of sin, and experiencing the futility of the utmost efforts which they can use for effecting their deliverance, they are tempted (sometimes it is to be feared they yield to the temptation) to give up all in despair, and to acquiesce under their wretched captivity, conceiving it impossible to break their chains. Sometimes, probably, it even happens that they are driven to seek for refuge from their disquietude in the suggestions of infidelity, and to quiet their troublesome consciences by arguments which they themselves scarcely believe, at the very moment in which they suffer themselves to be lulled asleep by them. In the mean time while this conflict has been going on, their walk is sad and comfortless, and their couch is nightly watered with tears. These men are pursuing the right object, but they mistake the way in which it is to be obtained. *The path in which they are now treading is not that which the Gospel has provided for conducting them to true holiness, nor will they find in it any solid peace.*

Persons under these circumstances naturally seek for religious instruction. They turn over the works of our modern Religionists, and as well as they can collect the advice addressed to men in their situation, the substance of it is, at the best, of this sort. "Be sorry indeed for your sins, and discontinue the practice of them, but do not make yourselves so uneasy. Christ died for the sins of the whole world. Do your utmost; discharge with fidelity the duties of your stations, not neglecting your religious offices, and fear not but that in the end all will go well, and that having thus performed the conditions required on your part, you will at last obtain forgiveness of our merciful Creator through the merits of Jesus Christ, and be aided, where your own strength shall be insufficient, by the assistance of his Holy Spirit. Meanwhile you cannot do better than read carefully such books of practical divinity as will instruct you in the principles of a Christian life. We are excellently furnished with works of this nature; and it is by the diligent study of them that you will gradually become a proficient in the lessons of the Gospel."

But the holy Scriptures, and with them the Church of England, call upon those who are in the circumstances above-stated, to *lay afresh the whole foundation of their Religion*. In concurrence with the Scripture, that Church calls upon them, in the first place, gratefully to adore that undeserved goodness which has awakened them from the sleep of death; to prostrate themselves before the Cross of Christ with humble penitence and deep self-abhorrence, solemnly resolving to forsake all their sins, but relying on the Grace of God alone for power to keep their resolution. Thus, and thus only, she assures them that all their crimes will be blot-

ted out, and that they will receive from above a new living principle of holiness. She produces from the Word of God the ground and warrant of her counsel; "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved."—"No man," says our blessed Saviour "cometh unto the Father but by me."—"I am the true vine. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself except it abide in the vine, no more can ye except ye abide in me."—"He that abideth in me and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit; for without (or severed from) me ye can do nothing."—"By grace ye are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast, for we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works."

Let us not be thought tedious, or be accused of running into needless repetitions, in pressing this point with so much earnestness. It is in fact a point which can never be too much insisted on. It is the cardinal point on which the whole of Christianity turns; on which it is peculiarly proper in this place to be perfectly distinct. There have been some who have imagined that the wrath of God was to be deprecated, or his favour conciliated, by austerities and penances, or even by forms and ceremonies, and external observances. But all men of enlightened understandings, who acknowledge the moral government of God, must also acknowledge, that vice must offend and virtue delight him. In short they must, more or less, assent to the Scripture declaration, "without holiness no man shall see the Lord." But the grand distinction which subsists between the true Christian and all other Religionists (the class of persons in particular whom it is our object to address) is concerning the *nature* of this holiness, and the *way in which it is to be obtained*. The views entertained by the latter, of the *nature* of holiness, are of all degrees of inadequateness; and they conceive it is to be *obtained* by their own natural unassisted efforts; or if they admit some vague indistinct notion of the assistance of the Holy Spirit, it is unquestionably obvious, on conversing with them, that this does not constitute the *main practical* ground of their dependence. *But the nature of the holiness to which the desires of the true Christian are directed, is no other than the restoration of the image of God; and as to the manner of acquiring it, disclaiming with indignation every idea of attaining it by his own strength, all his hopes of possessing it rest altogether on the divine assurances of the operation of the Holy Spirit, in those who cordially embrace the Gospel of Christ. He knows therefore that this holiness is not to PRECEDE his reconciliation to God, and be its CAUSE, but to FOLLOW it, and be its EFFECT. That in short it is by FAITH IN CHRIST only that he is to be justified in the sight of God; to be delivered from the condition of a child of wrath, and a slave of Satan; to be adopted into the family of God; to*

become an heir of God and a joint heir with Christ, entitled to all the privileges which belong to this high relation; here, to the Spirit of Grace, and a partial renewal after the image of his Creator; hereafter, to the more perfect possession of the Divine likeness, and an inheritance of eternal glory.

And as it is in this way, that in obedience to the dictates of the Gospel, the true Christian must originally become possessed of the vital Spirit and living principle of universal holiness, so, in order to grow in grace, he must also study in the same school; finding in the consideration of the peculiar doctrines of the Gospel, and in the contemplation of the life and character and sufferings of our blessed Saviour, the elements of all practical wisdom, and an inexhaustible storehouse of instructions and motives, no otherwise to be so well supplied. From the neglect of these peculiar doctrines arise the main practical errors of the bulk of professed Christians. These gigantic truths retained in view, would put to shame the littleness of their dwarfish morality. It would be impossible for them to make these harmonize with their low conceptions of the wretchedness and danger of their natural state, which is represented in Scripture as having so powerfully called forth the compassion of God, that he sent his only begotten Son to rescue us. Where *now* are their low conceptions of the worth of the soul, when means like these were taken to redeem it? Where *now* their inadequate conceptions of the guilt of sin, for which in the divine councils it seemed requisite that an atonement no less costly should be made, than that of the blood of the only begotten Son of God? How can they reconcile their low standard of Christian practice with the representation of our being “temples of the Holy Ghost?” Their cold sense of obligation, and scanty grudging returns of service, with the glowing gratitude of those who, having been “delivered from the power of darkness, and translated into the kingdom of God’s dear Son,” may well conceive that the labours of a whole life will be but an imperfect expression of their thankfulness.

The peculiar doctrines of the Gospel being once admitted, the conclusions which have been now suggested are clear and obvious deductions of reason. But our neglect of these important truths is still less pardonable, because they are distinctly and repeatedly applied in Scripture to the very purposes in question, and the whole superstructure of Christian morals is grounded on their deep and ample basis.

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