

My Testimony

By the Rev. G.E. Butt

I was born into the lap of Christian nurture. My religious instincts were always strong. I often came near finding Christ, and yet I was well on in my 'teens before taking the final step. Religion took the first place among the things which stirred my thinking powers. I cannot say that my religious thinking was much assisted by proper attention to the Bible. I remember still with shame how often it was neglected; and, when read, with what defective interest! My thoughts were often stirred by means of observation.

Professed Christians were the religious books to which I gave the most ready attention. One was a very poor man – a farm labourer - whose full Sabbath dress was a white smock frock. He lived near my home, and I saw much of him; and to my young imagination his life was as clean and sweet as his Sunday dress. He had a beaming face, a kind voice, and a heart that loved the boys. There is one scene, most vividly before my mind after seventy years. It was a public love-feast. The chapel was crowded with a congregation made up of all ages, mostly from the poorer walks of life. The meeting was about half-way through. Several “testimonies” had been given, when my old friend stood up. A great silence fell on the meeting, as though expectation ran high. There he stands in his snow-white smock, with his strong, composed face, the very picture of a venerable old man. In short, glowing sentences, he gives his experience. It extends over fifty years. From the first day until now his motto had been “*Onward. I press towards the mark,*” with a quiet weight of emphasis on the *press*. His last sentence fairly carried the meeting by storm: “Indeed, I never will go back, for when I cannot go forward, I will trig up.” The humour of the comparison, the strength of the confidence, the magnetic power of the old man, and the spiritual forces which pervaded the meeting, so seized my mind and stirred my soul, that for weeks I could think of but little else.

The other was a much younger man, and in many respects very different; and yet he impressed me even more favourably. He was a quiet, thoughtful, constant man, always the same; and yet deeply reverent. He was no stranger to trouble. He had known great reverses in his temporal circumstances; severe relative affliction had overtaken him, and he had passed through great personal suffering. But amid it all he was the same humble, devout Christian. He now and then manifested interest in my welfare by the ministry of a kind word; but, far beyond anything he ever said, the sight of his composed face, and the influence of his uniform life, awoke in my none too responsive mind trains of serious thought. These and other living examples of the reality and power of religion were the open books in which I read and felt the Divine claim on my own reverence and trust.



My educational advantages were under rather than over the low average of the day. But I was naturally of an enquiring turn of mind. This brought me into conflict with my religious teachers, and led to my being sometimes roughly, and, as I thought, unjustly handled. My moral perceptions were not slow to develop. My religious instincts soon showed themselves in a passion for goodness, an admiration for piety, and intense longings for spiritual fellowships.

When I was quite young my father would sometimes take me to a class-meeting which met in a cottage, and was led by a good -old mother in Israel. I often sat spellbound while the members related their experiences, and when the dear old leader felt moved, as sometimes she did, to put her hand on my head and say: "Lord, bless the lad," I felt, as I think a young minister must feel, when the Bishop places his hand on his head; that is, if he really believes in apostolic succession. I was very near the Kingdom then, and if those dear souls had understood child-piety, I should have been easily gathered in. The church was full of life and movement. Revival services, protracted meetings and open-air preachings were the order of the day. When a drunkard was re-claimed, or a poor blasphemer converted, there was great rejoicing. But in all this there was something lacking from the point of view of the needs of my young life. If only someone had been wise enough to have taken me by the hand, and told me I was a child of God; that He loved me, would bear with my failings, and welcome me into His Church, it would have set my longing heart at rest, and prevented the weary years of stumbling which followed.

The mystery of death came early into my life. I had a sweet little sister, whose gentle spirit was gaining a wonderful power over me. Just when her influence over me was assuming a more definite shape, she caught a fever and died. I was told that God had taken her away. Then God was unkind. And all the human associations which were thrown around the event tended to confirm this hard thought of God. As the day of the funeral approached, it became evident that our very garments were to join in this dark conspiracy against hope. Until then, my feelings, naturally strong, were wrought to desperation, and a wicked vengeance towards the cruel power which had caused the trouble filled my young soul. It is hard to say what would have been the consequences had not my mother come to the rescue. On the morning of the funeral she took me into the darkened room to look upon the little lifeless form. I was pleasingly surprised. My troubled imagination, aided by gloomy associations, had pictured a distorted and revolting form; but there it lay, tranquil and beautiful, as if in a sound sleep. My surprise supplied the key to my mother's remarks. With tearful eye, but hope-inspired accents, she assured me our dear one was not really dead, that only the body went to the grave; that God had taken the spirit to His own bright home; and that we had another reason now for being gentle and good, that we might meet her in heaven.

The Sunday school was an important factor in my early religious life. The teachers could not complain that I had been withheld from their influence too long, for I cannot remember when I first went. The teacher who always did me the most good was a plain man, in very humble life. I do not remember that he ever imparted much instruction, but his own goodness more than held us in check. I came to have a respect for him which was composed of admiration, love and reverence.

I should think I must have been about twelve years of age when a great new departure was made in our school. One Sunday morning it was announced that we should not need our copy-books in the afternoon as the whole time would be given up to a special religious service for the young. I was greatly delighted. Surely the hunger of my soul would now be satisfied! I do not remember anything that was said, but the influence was an inspiration from heaven.

Christ was real and present to me there; and, although I did not pray audibly, I did, pray silently and as though speaking into the ear of a friend close at hand.

All unconsciously to himself, one of our ministers greatly widened the scope of my spiritual longings. He had recently come to the circuit, and was having his first interview with my father. I happened to be standing near. Towards the end of the interview he suddenly turned to me and enquired of father: "Is this your son?" Being answered in the affirmative, he said: "I hope he is a good lad; his head will do for a preacher some day if he gets his heart right. God bless him." Why that was what my father was! It is true, he was only a local preacher, but he was my ideal, not only of a noble man, but of a good preacher. And could I be equal to my father? The thought soon became a desire, and the desire an ambition. My outlook was still further extended by attendance at a missionary meeting, where the claims of the heathen were stated with convincing clearness, and I conceived a strange longing to be a missionary.

Then came a break in my life, and for nearly a year I lived some miles away from my own people. During my absence from home there was a change of ministers, and also a change of methods; for when I returned a circuit revival was in progress, and many were being gathered into the Church; and some of my old companions were among the saved, and some of them were even working in the services. This gave me great hope. I attended all the meetings, stayed to the after-meetings; and one night even went forward for prayer, and consented to have my name enrolled among the converts. But I was not happy. I had no testimony to give. My mind was greatly perplexed. This troubled state lasted many weeks. A quiet old man lived near my father's house. He attended all the services, and seemed in touch with all the work, yet took no prominent part. He called me in one day to have a chat. Affecting the style of a Quaker, which suited his character, he said: "Thou art not happy, my child. Thou hast attended all the meetings, but I fear they have not been an unmixed joy to thee." I was touched. His insight and sympathy opened my heart, and for the first time in my life I put into words my difficulties. As I told him of the agony of fear I felt that my day of grace had passed, a tear trembled in his kind eye. The very act of telling him gave me relief. A few judicious questions showed him, and indeed showed me, the mistakes I was making about faith. I was making the common mistake of placing it after *feeling*. I wanted to feel I was saved, and then I would believe. He put the true order before me; and then said it was not well to think too much about feeling, for it is faith, not feeling, which saves. And then he was led to give me this further explanation of faith: "My child, faith is not a word, it is not a speech, it is not a single act. It may commence in a moment, but it continues; it is a life. It is the constant outgoing of the whole soul in thought, and desire, and love and trust to God in Christ." It was enough. I could see it plainly. There was no rush of ecstatic joy. It was Christmas-Eve, and as I knelt at my bedside on that never-to-be-forgotten night, my prayer was mostly thanksgiving. The moments seemed too precious for sleep, and I sat long into the night cherishing high resolves and making vows which, through God's mercy, are still potential in my life.

Reference

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