



The vulnerability of true religion

Hardly anything in this world is more liable to damage than true religion. We find it in the Bible, we read of its having made its appearance at favoured periods of history and we discover it still in choice places. But it is a rare and exotic plant whose delicate petals are early bruised and whose fragrance is quickly destroyed by man. This observation is much the same as that of a noted Highland preacher of old. Asked if he had any complaint against Jesus Christ, he replied: *'Yes, that he comes so seldom and stays so short a time'*. It is the wealth of men and nations when Christ comes to dwell among them. But it is all too easy to drive him away. He will not stay long where he is not loved and wanted, and when once we have grieved him to depart he takes away with him gospel, church and grace.

When we here speak of true religion we mean something more and better than what is commonly understood by the term 'Christianity'. We refer to Christianity in its best and highest form, in which its professors glow with ardour for the Word of God and are fervent in their attachment to one another; where accuracy in doctrine is matched by mutual love and mutual trust; and where the aim of all is to excel in spirituality and obedience. Such is the Christianity that Christ brought to earth. It is seen in the apostolic churches in large measure, though even there it is marred in many ways either by error in the head or by error in the heart or by both.

Not that true religion began with the New Testament. Its first original was in paradise where our first parents, as yet strangers to the Fall, walked with God and worshipped him with unsinning consecration. At that time true religion was natural and came easy to man. Though the period of its existence was brief, it was heavenly. The heart of man revolved round its Maker and instinctively sought and found its full happiness in him. At that period of man's history — the only golden age our world has yet known — all religion was pure and perfect. No idol had yet been made or even conceived in the imagination. The bright image of the invisible God shone perfectly in Adam's soul, and was reflected in his every thought of God. Every kindness of God's providence at that time was matched in man by an answering gratitude. Man's first religion was the perfect mirror-image of the glorious being of the Lord their God.

After the Fall man's religion had to change to suit his altered circumstances. Blood must now, and for many centuries to come, be shed on many altars to teach the worshipper that he approached a Deity whose majesty he had offended and whose justice required to be placated. Our fallen parents must now be clothed with skins as a sign of their need of Another's righteousness, now that their own was wholly lost. Their religion now must be built upon the promise of a coming Deliverer who should one day crush the Serpent's head and do so after intense suffering on his own part (Genesis 3:15; Romans 16:20). True religion after the Fall all hangs on the hook of sovereign grace and it must be bathed at every point in the fountain of Messiah's blood. It is henceforth not obvious or natural to man but comes to him as mystery that he cannot understand apart from an act of heavenly enlightenment.

It is this fact which explains more than anything else can do, why true religion has always since the Fall been so vulnerable. God's truth and worship since the Fall are things that man in his present state cannot begin to understand.

Fallen man sees the gospel all upside down. He makes no sense of it and so he must needs reinterpret it and rewrite it. It is this fact that explains why all through history, from Cain's day to this, men have perverted God's religion and — left to their own light — they always will. The history of religion is the history of abominations.

At certain points in the past these abominations were visible and tangible. God was represented under grotesque statues and worshipped by grotesque rituals. The Old Testament reference to these is fully supported by what we know of religions, past and present, in countries outside the knowledge of Israel. Nothing so perfectly betrays the inner depravity of man's heart as the record of his religious ceremonies. These are either ugly or cruel or lewd — and frequently all three at once.

At other points in man's history, especially in lands favoured with the Word of God, these external inventions of man's debased imagination are suppressed, only to resurface in other forms. In the case of Sadducaism it was by a denial of the supernatural. They believed neither angel nor resurrection (Acts 23:8). They were the Rationalists of their day. In Pharisaism this tendency to distort true religion took a rather different course. The adherents of their movement converted the religion of God's Word from a method of grace into a system of human merit. They gloried in the *form* of the true religion, but they knew nothing of its inward *power*. The result in both cases was much the same. Souls were robbed of a knowledge of God and religion was robbed of its chief excellence, which is its ability to convert the soul. True believers who lived in the days when Pharisaism and Sadducaism were prominent had to live outside the sphere of religious officialdom and they had to find food for their souls elsewhere.

The above remarks have their applications of course to many situations in *Christian* times also. Again and again God's true worshippers have had to go '*outside the camp*' (Hebrews 13:13) of official religion to find fellowship and so as to enjoy real worship and to meet true godliness. The pure religion of one generation becomes the false religion of another. And sometimes this change comes about in one single generation. The battle-cry of a Luther, or Calvin, or Knox, may quickly become merely the *slogan* of a later age. The words are the same but the fire has gone out of them. What came from a renewed heart in one age came only from a carnal heart at the later stage.

The church of Christ has always, and rightly, striven to preserve its religion pure and entire in after times. For this reason it has compiled its creeds, confessions and catechisms. These documents have, in God's mercy, done much to help Christians to transmit pure religion to posterity. But even the best of creeds have not been able to guarantee the permanence of truth. The fault is not in the creeds but in the heart of man. The best of men may have perverse children, and the best ages of the church are sometimes quickly followed by men who undo all that their forefathers did and unsay what they said.

The explanation for all this is not far to seek. No element in true religion is palatable to the natural man and some of its elements are specially distasteful. Consequently the truths of Christianity, embraced and loved as they must be in all the best ages of the church, can only be thought cumbersome and unwelcome to professing Christians living in, and anxious to be conformed to, a more decadent age.

The beliefs and practices of the fathers, however excellent, are often in such days referred to with scorn as mere 'traditions'. The robes of their fathers' religion, too big for the pigmy generation that follows, are cut down to a miniature size. To strive to reach their stature would be too much like hard work for a Christianity that half-loves the worldly mammon. Only one course is open for such men to follow. They must sneer at everything that belongs to the past and shrink their fathers' religion down to their own capacity.

To say all this is not to pretend that there is nothing in the religion of the fathers that could not be improved. Our argument is not that in every possible way '*the old is better*' (Luke 5:39) but that we should not discard anything from the religion of our fathers without good reason. Too often the old is thrown off because it is too good and because it makes demands upon men's lives which a later age is not prepared to tolerate. We suspect that this is the real reason why the religion of the Reformers and Puritans has frequently since had a bad press. Theirs was a religion so close to the Word of God and so very nearly that of Christ and the apostles, that it has chafed the shoulders of all Laodicean Christians ever after.

It is a pity that more research has not been done on the theme of religious declension. Granted that it is not so important as the theme of revival, it *is* important and has lessons to teach, which we dare not ignore. The ways by which churches and individuals lose their grasp of the gospel must be an instructive one. We offer some brief suggestions as to how this process takes place.

The highest expression known to man of the Christian religion — so it seems to us — is what we refer to as Puritanism. It is that religion which embraces the whole counsel of God, strives to obey all God's known will for man, to have God glorified on earth and which believes in his familiar dealings with the soul here and now. Wherever this religion is found it tends to give to men a heaven upon earth of assurance and godliness.

But as soon as a later generation emerges which resents the theology of the best days, men speak unkindly of it and take steps to modify it to suit themselves. The first casualties are always much the same. God's sovereignty in election and reprobation is eroded. The uniqueness of Christ's person and work is downplayed. The place of the Moral Law in the believer's life gives way to undefined 'love'. Grace is valued less than education. Sermons are listened to rather out of duty than profit. The church ceases to be the centre of men's lives, and scrupulous obedience to scriptural commands is bartered for a convenient accommodation to the standards of the world.

These outward signs of declension are the visible fruits of a deeper problem within the soul. This is a mysterious subject and one not easily understood by man. But it appears that the silent change of attitude from a more to a less spiritual generation happens in some such way as the following.

The best generations of Christians are filled with grace and with the Spirit of God. As time goes on, however, this level of excellence suffers decay and loss. The rising generation which follows differs from their fathers as silver from gold, and that which follows differs again as brass from silver. The same truths are believed and taught. But not with the same power or passion. God is not so clearly apprehended within the heart. Truth is not so precious.

Prayer and fellowship with Christ are not such high priorities. The forms of religion are as yet unchanged but their power is greatly diminished.

The next stage is easy to predict. Where people have ceased to be excited by their creed they will sooner or later revise it downwards. They often do so under pretence of 'improving' it, or of 'returning to the early church', or of 'removing old traditions', or the like. Sin in the heart works deceitfully. It will not at first reject the Word of God openly in case it loses the respect of others. But as time proceeds the process of amending and revising the true religion gains momentum. From being ashamed to touch the creeds and confessions of their fathers men at last grow confident. In the end they throw off all pretence and openly disavow those very doctrines which once formed the very constitutions of their own churches. There is scarcely a church or denomination under the sun which does not bear witness to this process of decline. It begins, as all declension begins, when men cease to *love* the truth.

This downward tendency in the human heart accounts for all the religious errors of the church, and of the whole world indeed. The plain fact is that truth and pure religion are such high, holy and heavenly things that man *cannot* love them till he is brought under the power of divine grace. Even then, man is so liable to decline in grace that he can hardly bear true religion for very long. Two generations, or perhaps three, may hold fast to a sound creed. But for more than three generations to retain the truth without serious loss is remarkable and it is rare.

The above sad fact explains the shrewd saying that 'every institution sooner or later becomes its opposite'. If we confine the application of this saying only to churches, we see at once how just it is. Every church, more or less, that we know of in history has ended up by disowning its original creed! It began by admiring the Scriptures and it ended by rejecting them. It began admiring Luther, or Calvin, or Wesley, or some other great leader of the past, and it ended up by turning its back on all that they taught! The church began with one creed and before long it had evolved another, which was virtually the contradiction of the first. No doubt there are here and there exceptions to this rule. But they cannot be many.

The only way to keep churches and groups of Christians sound is to keep their hearts lively with grace. Nothing else will preserve true religion. Neither creeds, nor university divinity departments, nor historical knowledge, nor extensive learning, nor anything else will keep right religion in the midst of a company of professing Christians if they have once lost their love of the truth. The rule is simple and it is never-failing: If men do not love a doctrine they will not long keep up their attachment to it. The earth will cease to go round the sun before that rule is rendered obsolete.

If true religion then is so vulnerable, it is clear where our first duty as Christians lies. It is to watch carefully and daily over our affections. The moment we suspect that our love of Christ is waning we must cry out for grace. If our love for any point of truth becomes dim, we are to cast ourselves to the ground before God, fearing lest he should give us over to our hardness of heart. All this is deep and humbling work. But it is the only way to hold true religion fast. The alternative is to *'lose our first love'* (Revelation 2:4). Not for nothing does the Spirit of God say:

'Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.'

Proverbs 4:23

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