

Project Canterbury

Popular Misconceptions of the Episcopal Church.

By William Reed Huntington.

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Chapter II. That it knows Nothing of a Change of Heart.

Our notions as to the necessity of "a change of heart" if men would be rightly religious, inevitably take color from our previous estimate of what "Nature" can and does accomplish for us.

Understood in one sense, "natural" is an epithet of praise; understood in another sense, it carries a suggestion of disparagement. As contrasted either with what is *unnatural* or with what is artificial, "the natural" seems praiseworthy; but as contrasted with what is "spiritual," we do not hesitate to call "the natural" inferior. For instance, we praise a person's manners because they are natural, not affected; we praise his literary style because it is natural, not stilted or overstrained; we say of a story that it is a good one because naturally told; and we commend an artist because his statue, or his picture, is true to nature. But then, on the other hand, when we see one of two men who have been put under equal provocation lose his temper, while the other keeps his, though we may charitably seek to excuse the first by saying of his lapse that it was at least natural; "natural" would be the very last epithet we should dream of applying to the other, for we should feel in our hearts that in his case there had been a manifestation of something better [17/18] and stronger than Nature. The man's act of self-control has brought us into the region of the spiritual, and what we are witnessing is a conquest over Nature. So then, while we see that there is plainly something beneath the natural, namely, the unnatural, there is also something above the natural, namely, the spiritual.

The teaching of the Bible is that we are born, here on earth, into the natural, and that, being here, we are given the opportunity of being born anew up wards or "from above" into the spiritual. Broadly speaking, two sorts of life are open to a man: the life in which there is a recognition of a duty towards God, together with an honest purpose to fulfil the same; and, again, the life from which it is attempted to leave out the thought of a God and of an hereafter altogether. We all know people of whom we should say that if there were no life beyond this one, and in this life no occasion for putting up with unpleasant realities and bearing unwelcome burdens, they would seem to be the very men and women for whom the universe had been especially established. They fit into Nature so admirably; their sensibilities are so excellently attuned to all the sights and sounds of earth; they are such adepts at using their faculties, so adroit, so ready, so quick to see what tact demands, so able to do it gracefully when seen, that although we may know them to be utterly selfish at heart, wholly incapable of costly sacrifice or high endeavor or generous devotion, it is impossible not to admire them and difficult not to envy them. These are the children of this world, we say; and if this world were all, what better could we wish than to be of their company while life lasts? But turn from such a picture as that, and look for a few moments at the [18/19] face of an aged woman who, in the school of Christ,

has been learning these many years such lessons as He has to teach. Perhaps she is some kinswoman of yours and you know her well. Her beauty is gone, as David has it, because of trouble; her face is seamed and furrowed with the lines of care; sorrow has set its ineffaceable seal upon the brow, and the eye has lost the flash and gleam that once belonged to it; but in the placid smile you see a beauty wholly different in kind from anything that greets you elsewhere; her quiet cheerfulness seems to bear you up upon its wings, and from her very presence there breathes out the blessing of eternal peace. She has forgotten self, she is living for you and me. Is it to be supposed that the natural ever develops itself unaided into this? Never. This is the victory of the spiritual. This was not born of Nature, but has been added to it. For "that is not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural; and afterward that which is spiritual. The first man is of the earth, earthy." Cultivate nature, say some, and then at your leisure you can refine it into spirit. But that is not what the Bible says. The doctrine of the Bible is that by the grace--that is to say, by the communicated help--of Him who made us, we pass from the lower range to the higher, from the rank of first among the animals to that other rank which springs from membership in the family of God, servants no longer, but children, and children who are at home in their Father's house.

To illustrate this change, the Bible writers use various figures of speech, parables of one sort and another, but the one that made the deepest impression on the mind of the early church was our Lord's similitude of [19/20] the new birth. "Verily, verily, I say unto thee," ran his words to Nicodemus, "except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." A new life, that is to say, befits the child who is to be heir of heaven. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. You cannot transmute the one into the other, but the other must be added to the one. It is not that nature is discarded as a thing that ought not to have been; rather it is that nature is made the basis, the ground-work, the foundation upon which the spiritual structure shall be built.

The butterfly flitting about in the sunshine is a far lovelier object than the worm crawling in the dust; but the regeneration, the new birth of the chrysalis never could have taken place had there been no worm; for it is just as essential, apparently, to man's perfection that he should have a nature as it is that his nature should be glorified by the touch and presence of the Spirit. I might multiply illustrations and dwell on them, but to do so would keep me from my main points, which are, first, to show that the Episcopal Church does really lay great stress upon the change of heart which is necessary before men can be pleasing to God; and secondly, to explain how it has come about that among Christian people in America the opposite is so generally believed.

For the thorough establishment of the first point--namely, the fact that the Episcopal Church does hold to the importance of a very real change--one single quotation from the Prayer-Book will suffice. In the opening exhortation of the service appointed for the Baptism of those of riper years, we read: "Dearly Beloved, forasmuch as all men are conceived and born [20/21] in sin (and that which is born of the flesh is flesh), and they who are in the flesh cannot please God, but live in sin, committing many actual transgressions; and our Saviour Christ saith none can enter into the Kingdom of God except he be regenerate and born anew of water and of the Holy Ghost: I beseech you to call upon God the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ, that of his bounteous goodness He will grant to this person that which by nature he cannot have."

Nothing could well be plainer than this; here is abundant evidence that the Episcopal Church does teach with great emphasis the necessity of a change of some sort before man can be

considered as having been, so to say, set right with his Maker.

The way, therefore, is clear for passing on to inquire why it is that this Church should have been so very widely misunderstood and misrepresented in the matter.

I believe the main reasons to be these:

First. The fact that the Church does not require, and never has required, of candidates for admission to its membership, that they fix the date of their "change of heart," by assigning it to a definite day, or week, or month, or year.

Secondly. The fact that no statement of his personal experience is demanded of the candidate either publicly or semi-publicly, the whole matter being left in the hands of the pastor as the people's spiritual guide, and the decision allowed to hinge largely upon the good faith and conscience of the individual himself.

Thirdly. The fact that in the ritual of the Church, "regeneration" seems to be bound up so intricately [21/22] with the sacrament of Baptism that the two would appear to be considered as substantially one and the same thing.

Fourthly. The fact that the communicants of the Church show no signs of being different in aims and modes of life after their Baptism, or their Confirmation, from what they were before.

Such I believe to be the popular reasons, certainly the most widely diffused popular reasons, for believing that the Episcopal Church does not maintain or teach the necessity of a change of heart. The consideration of the last of the four must be postponed until the general topic of "worldliness" shall have come up for consideration, but the other three may be taken in band at once.

And, first, as to the matter of assigning a date to the period of one's having become a Christian. The secret of the Church's reluctance so to fix a time lies partly in her reverence for that mystery with which it has pleased God to shroud the beginnings of all life; partly in her fear lest she tempt people into being hypocritical; and partly in the immense value which she attaches to Christian nurture.

"The wind," says our Lord, "bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh or whither it goeth; so is every one that is born of the Spirit." But if we cannot tell whence it came, how can we possibly tell when it began? Or, to put a question still more to the point: If we feel it blowing, why do we need to know when it began? There is more in human nature than is included within the horizon of consciousness.

But waiving this point, look at the question of [22/23] Christian nurture. This is something in which the Episcopal Church believes with its whole heart. Whether rightly or wrongly, this Church insists that the true way to bring up children is to treat them as Christian children from the outset, and to try to make them realize from the earliest dawn of their intelligent life that the obligations of a Christian are resting on them. Of course, I do not mean by this that we would seek to make of them precocious religionists, premature saints. Much the contrary. Childhood has its own type of religion, just as youth, manhood, and old age have theirs. Childhood, if it is

to be rightly religions, must be religious after its own sort; but the religion of the child, if genuine, will be just as beautiful, just as symmetrical, as the religion of the tempted and victorious saint. The little crocus of the early spring is as perfect in its measure as the stately lily. The Episcopal Church believes in this; it believes in the slow and gradual superadding of the spiritual to the natural, until we have as the result a mature Christian character, the stability of which can be depended upon in all weathers. Of course, it is little that the Church can do through its ministry and its public services to bring all this to pass, unless it have the hearty and patient cooperation of fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, sponsors and Sunday-school teachers. Hence results fall far, far short of what the theory might lead us to expect. But the results, meagre as they are as compared with what they might be, are enough to encourage all who give attention to them. Whatever is bright, whatever is cheerful, happy, or wholesome, children can easily be taught to love, and these are the things which this Church seeks to make [23/24] foremost in the religion of the children intrusted to her care.

As the graver and sadder aspects of life dawn on them, the children thus trained will have something to fall back upon, something to encourage them, something to save them from gloom, despondency, and shipwreck. Entertaining, as she does, these convictions about the spiritual growth of children from infancy to maturity, the Church naturally shrinks from any too great particularity as to the time when the change passed upon any given heart that made it a heart subject to God's grace. The important point is, Is it such a heart? If it be, the question when it became such is of far lesser moment. "Howbeit, that was not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural; and afterward that which is spiritual"--yes, afterward, but how long afterward? Who shall presume to say?

I think I am speaking the mind of most pastors of souls, whether they be in the orders of the Episcopal Church or not, when I affirm that those Christian characters are, as a rule, more to be depended upon for wear, which have been the fruit of gradual growth, than those are which have sprung from sudden conversion. Of course, there have been and are striking exceptions, but the rule holds.

I spoke of the fact that this Church leaves the responsibility of admitting persons to its membership wholly to the good faith and conscience of the minister and the candidate himself, as furnishing another explanation of the popular error we have under review. Let us look at this. It is perfectly true that the Episcopal Church does not summon a man before [24/25] a committee of his neighbors in order to ascertain whether he be spiritually minded or no. But do we find that the Lord Jesus Christ ever required this of people, or anything like this, as a condition precedent of discipleship? Do we find that any one of the Apostles, in his administration of the affairs of the Church, ever did so? If we do, then certainly the practice ought to be kept up; but if we do not, then let us lay no heavier burdens on men's shoulders than Christ laid on them.

There were certain things which our Saviour and the disciples did require. What were they? Open acknowledgment of belief in Christ was one. "Whosoever shall confess me before men," said Jesus, "him will I also confess." The Episcopal Church requires this of all who seek her membership. Nothing could well be more open and public than her appointed modes of confessing Christ. If any one either makes or ratifies the solemn promises of Baptism insincerely, if he takes words upon his lips which in his heart he does not mean, the guilt is upon his own conscience, he sins against the light, he must bear the burden and reap the

punishment known as the portion of the hypocrites. But if, on the other hand, a person does honestly say that he is desirous of making and keeping the vows of the Christian life; if he says this, moreover, after patient and careful instruction has been given him (and perhaps some of those who allow themselves to speak slightly of Confirmation as an "empty form" are not aware of what pains-taking preparation is commonly made for it weeks in advance)--if, I say, we have before us a person who is willing, knowingly and deliberately, to answer for himself the [25/26] solemn questions: Dost thou repent? Dost thou believe? Wilt thou obey?--ought we not to consider the fact as evidence, in itself, that in this case "spirit" has begun to act on "nature" and the face been set right toward God?

St. Paul declares that no man can say (say honestly and understandingly, of course, he means) that Jesus is the Lord "but by the Holy Ghost." Well then, here in the case supposed is one who does say that "Jesus is the Lord," who says it with every appearance of honestly meaning it, and who affirms, moreover, that it is in his heart to serve and follow this Lord, this Saviour, this Master, while life lasts. Is the Episcopal Church at fault that she says to this person, if he have never been sacramentally adopted into the congregation of Christ's flock: "Arise and be baptized, and wash away thy sins;" or if she pray for him in Confirmation: "Defend, O Lord, this thy child with thy heavenly grace; that he may continue thine for ever, and daily increase in thy Holy Spirit more and more, until he come unto thine everlasting kingdom"?

And this leads me naturally to speak of the intimate connection recognized in the Episcopal Church between Baptism and regeneration.

The two are associated together, not because it is believed that the sprinkling of a little water and the pronouncing of a few words are efficacious to bring about a "moral change" in the heart of the infant brought to the font. The whole House of Bishops has, by formal vote, repudiated that notion. [See "Journal of the House of Bishops," in the Report of the General Convention for 1871.] But just as the ceremony of marriage defines a point of time at [26/27] which there is public recognition taken of that mutual love of two persons which makes the real sacredness of marriage, so is the administration of Baptism the public recognition, in the case of any given candidate, be he child or man, that here is one who is entering on the new life. "What!" some one exclaims; "that little, unconscious infant entering on the new life?" "Yes," we answer, without fear; "even so. We mean to take it for granted, in bringing this child up, that he is the child of God, and not the child of hell. The Church is willing to incur the risk, and, if you please, to bear the blame. The child may turn out badly, but he shall not have it in his power to say bitterly in the hour of his ruin that it has come upon him because he was given a bad name at the start."

Yes, the Episcopal Church believes in a change of heart; I should be still nearer right if I said she believes in many changes of heart, repeated changes of heart, whenever there is call for them. Alas for any system of religion which supposes that a single change of heart will, in every case, suffice! Besides the one great change of attitude which is implied in turning to God, how often is there need that we turn again from following our own desires and seeking our own pleasures to find anew the way of life!