

tion the supreme need of practical method and the reality of intellectual difficulty and doubt, aspects of life which all but the greatest mystics tend to ignore.

What, then, after all these corrections, is the

value of mysticism for faith and practice? Its value is that it keeps the eternal ever before us in this our earthly and temporal life. Mr. QUICK does not claim that it has added anything to the knowledge that we have of God in the face of Jesus Christ. He claims only that it keeps God very near.

Wesley's Doctrine of Assurance.

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THE steps of that pilgrimage which led Wesley at last into possession of the full assurance of faith were all taken Godward. Wesley's conversion has been variously placed, but, taking the word to mean a turning from evil to God, we can see that Wesley from his youth up had set his face to seek God. The final step of that search was taken on the memorable 24th of May 1738. His early training laid the foundation, says Canon Overton, 'of that simplicity, guilelessness, and unworldliness, which were his strongly marked characteristics all through his life.' His father admitted him to the Lord's table when he was only eight years of age. He was eleven when he entered the Charterhouse School. Tyerman says, 'Wesley, while at this seat of learning, lost the religion which had marked his character from the days of infancy . . . John Wesley entered the Charterhouse a saint, and left it a sinner.'¹ It was not so bad as that. 'I still read the Scriptures, and said my prayers, morning and evening. And what I now hoped to be saved by, was (1) not being so bad as other people; (2) having still a kindness for religion; and (3) reading the Bible, going to church, and saying my prayers.'² His life at Oxford followed the same lines. 'Being removed to the University for five years, I still said my prayers both in public and private, and read with the Scriptures several other books of religion, especially comments on the New Testament. Yet I had not all this while so much as a notion of inward holiness; nay, went on habitually, and, for the most part, very contentedly, in some or other known sin—indeed, with some intermission and short struggles, especially before and after the Holy Communion, which I was

obliged to receive thrice a year. I cannot tell what I hoped to be saved by now when I was continually sinning against the little light I had; unless by those transient fits of what many divines taught me to call repentance.'²

We follow him to find him greatly influenced by three books, *The Imitation of Christ*, *Holy Living and Holy Dying*, and *The Serious Call*. *The Imitation*, with its keynote of devotion, flashed its search-light on one point only—that of personal communion with God. It is not concerned with the results of spiritual communion. It never sees humanity's needs. It helped to centre Wesley's thoughts on Christ, and to give a form of spiritual selfishness to the early struggle. (He went to Georgia in 1735, 'to save his soul.') Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living and Holy Dying* led him to make the decision. 'I resolved to dedicate all my life to God.' He got much of his High Church bent from this work. Law's *Serious Call*, with its central teaching, 'nothing godly can be alive in us, but what has all its life from the Spirit of God, living and breathing in us,' gave him a new view of spiritual life and intensified its purpose.

With opened eyes Wesley searches the Bible as the one, the only standard of truth. His quest was for 'a uniform following of Christ, an entire inward and outward conformity to our Master.'

The formation of the 'Holy Club' helped Wesley and the Oxford Methodists, by self-discipline, service, and study, to reach a fairly complete knowledge of what a Christian ought to be and do, but the way of attainment was not yet clear to him.

Wesley is now a Fellow of Lincoln College, and has taken Holy Orders. He preaches before the University on January 1, 1733, and defines 'faith' as

¹ *Life and Times of Wesley*, vol. i. pp. 21, 22.

² *Journals*, May 24, 1738.

‘an unshaken assent to all that God hath revealed in Scripture, and in particular to those important truths—“Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners”; “He bare our sins in his own body on the tree”; “He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.”’ Long after the Aldersgate Street experience, Wesley republished this sermon, with this remarkable addition, ‘Not only an unshaken assent, but likewise the revelation of Christ in our hearts; a divine evidence or conviction of His love, His free unmerited love to me a sinner; a sure confidence in His pardoning mercy, wrought in us by the Holy Ghost, a confidence whereby every true believer is enabled to bear witness, “I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that Jesus Christ the Righteous is my Lord and the propitiation for my sins. I know He hath loved me; and I have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins.”’¹

Wesley’s further steps in the discovery of the doctrine of assurance led him to Georgia, where Spangenberg, the Moravian, probed his heart thus: “My brother . . . Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit that you are the child of God?” I was surprised and knew not what to answer. He observed it, and asked, “Do you know Jesus Christ?” I paused and said, “I know He is the Saviour of the world.” “True,” he replied, “but do you know He has saved you?” I answered, “I hope He has died to save me.” He only added, “Do you know yourself?” I said, “I do.” But I fear they were vain words.²

Wesley is steadily learning. He refuses no guidance, but, with that clear and acute mind, he resolutely searches into all he is taught and winnows wheat from chaff. Coming back from Georgia, he writes: ‘It is now two years and almost four months since I left my native country in order to teach the Georgian Indians the nature of Christianity. But what have I learned myself in the meantime? Why (what I least of all suspected), that I who went to America to convert others was never myself converted to God.’ [He writes thirty years after, ‘I am not sure of this.’] He goes on to say, ‘The faith I want is’ (years after he adds a note, ‘the faith of a son’) ‘a sure trust and confidence in God, that, through the merits of Christ

my sins are forgiven and I reconciled to the favour of God. . . . I want that faith that none can have without knowing that he hath it,’ a faith that frees from sin, fear, doubt, and that witnesses ‘with his spirit that he is a child of God.’³

In touch with the Moravians going out, in touch with them again when he comes home, ‘in a state of spiritual discomfort and destitution,’ he has learned some important truths. He has learned to preach ‘faith’ though he has it not. Böhler says, ‘Preach faith till you have it, and then because you have it you will preach faith.’ Wesley soon found he stumbled not at the preaching of faith. In his preaching he received proof of the instantaneousness of faith. Clifford, a prisoner under sentence of death, received deliverance for his soul. Wesley found scarce anything else, to his surprise, as he searched the Scriptures.

Wesley next learns that this faith is ‘the free gift of God.’ He renounces ‘all dependence, in whole or part, upon my own works or righteousness’; and continually prays ‘for this very thing, justifying saving faith, and full reliance on the blood of Christ shed for me; a trust in Him as my Christ, as my sole justification, sanctification, and redemption.’

It is now May 22nd, 1738. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, ‘I had continual sorrow and heaviness of heart.’ At 5 A.M. on the 24th Wesley reads the words, ‘There are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: even that ye should be partakers of the divine nature.’ A little later, as he goes out, ‘Thou art not far from the kingdom of God.’ At St. Paul’s the anthem was, ‘Out of the deep have I called unto Thee, O Lord.’

Then the *Journal* records the famous passage that puts the topstone upon his experience of deliverance, that gives him the full assurance of faith. ‘In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation: and an assurance was given me, that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death. I began to pray with all my might for those who had in a more especial manner despitely used me and

¹ *Fifty-three Sermons*, pp. 221, 222.

² *Journals*, February 7, 1736.

³ *Ibid.* February 29, 1738.

persecuted me. I then testified openly to all there, what I now first felt in my heart. But it was not long before the enemy suggested, "This cannot be faith, for where is thy joy." Then was I taught that peace and victory over sin are essential to faith in the Captain of our salvation; but that, as to the transports of joy that usually attend the beginning of it, especially in those who have mourned deeply, God sometimes giveth, sometimes withholdeth them, according to the counsels of His own will.' Wesley's heart has its fluctuations like all other seekers'. While he never loses his assurance of salvation, resting his whole weight on God's word and Christ's work, he does, for a time, have 'fears within.' In his note on Ro 8¹⁶, published sixteen years later, he says, 'Happy they who enjoy this clear and constant' (this direct witness of the Spirit). He was not long in finding his spiritual balance. The pendulum swung fairly evenly between the abiding desire of his believing heart and the abiding witness ('a testimony distinct from that of his own spirit or the testimony of a good conscience') of the Spirit that he was a child of God. His life kept time according to the will of God for the remaining fifty-three years, and his last words were an echo of the Aldersgate Street experience, 'The best of all is, God is with us.' Twenty-five days after his discovery of 'saving faith,' Wesley preached at St. Mary's, Oxford, and gave this clear and explicit definition. 'Christian faith, then, is not only an assent to the whole gospel of Christ, but also a full reliance on the blood of Christ; a trust in the merits of His life, death, and resurrection; a recumbency upon Him as our atonement and our life, as *given for us* and *living in us*; and in consequence hereof, a closing with Him, and cleaving to Him, as our "wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption," or, in one word, our salvation.'¹

Wesley's doctrine of assurance is an assurance of present pardon. That present and continued experience gave him and his followers the directness, the vigour, the conviction, the personal witness that was the conspicuous contribution of Methodism to religious life. Wesley's personal testimony, as well as the testimony of the fruit of his ministry, lays emphasis on this experience as the turning-point in his life. He says, 'From 1725 to 1729 I preached much, but saw no fruit of my labour . . . from 1729 to 1734, laying a deeper

¹ *Fifty-three Sermons*, pp. 3, 4.

foundation of repentance, I saw a little fruit. But it was only a little; and no wonder: for I did not preach faith in the blood of the Covenant; from 1734 to 1738, speaking more of faith in Christ, I saw more fruit to my preaching; from 1738, speaking continually of Jesus Christ, laying Him only for the foundation of the whole building, making Him all in all, the first and the last . . . the "word of God ran" as fire among the stubble.'²

Wesley has taught us that assurance is more than merely intellectual assent. It is the soul consciously transformed by the passion of love. It is the first cry of the child after its consciousness of spiritual birth, 'Abba, Father.' It is the filial response to the witness of the Spirit of Sonship, of adoption, of justification. It is the continued voice of the child speaking to the Father, as the Spirit 'bearing witness' unfolds what sonship means to the believing heart. Assurance is the fruit, not the essence of faith. Wesley taught that the Spirit bears witness separately to our justification, adoption, and sanctification. He was always careful to emphasize that this was the privilege of all the children of God.

It was given in answer to the cry of the believing heart, though 'how' may never be understood. Wesley's own experience teaches us how hard it is for the intellect to learn that this assurance is altogether God's gift, and that He cannot bear witness with our spirit until we trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and this the humblest child of God can do although he cannot explain one letter of the new spiritual alphabet he is learning.

The full assurance of faith, as taught by Wesley, safeguards both objective and subjective faith. It rests upon the objective faith. It looks back, to Calvary; and up, to Christ; and sees the Saviour. Then it looks in, and sees that the believer is a child of God—pardoned. The basis of the certainty rests securely on the revelation of the atoning work of Christ; on the fact of Christ, and on 'all that the Cross essentially implies.' The relation between objective and subjective assurance will vary much. As in Wesley's case, 'the implicit became the explicit.' As in the case of the pagan mobs to whom he preached there came a deep conviction of sin. They became assured of a real definite and inexorable God, who hated sin, but who had given His own Son that sin might be

² *Works*, viii. 468.

forgiven, and that a new life might be led. Whatever their vision of the Saviour, they received the assurance of pardon, and the subjective certitude led them to further objective certainty.

The quality of endurance of this assurance receives abundant testimony in the *Lives of Early Methodist Preachers*. One of the thirty-four 'helpers,' Christopher Hopper, aged 79, after fifty-six years in the Lord's service says, 'On this foundation all my hopes are founded now, and it does support me. I have not a doubt—no, not a shadow of a doubt; and as for the enemy I know not what has become of him.' Thomas Taylor, after fifty-five years of hard service, writes, 'I stand amazed at the goodness of God towards me.' Wesley's doctrine of assurance covers the whole of what salvation includes, past, present, and future. It rests, objectively, upon the truth of the Word of God; of the Resurrection of Christ—which is the surety of His power to save; and of the whole revelation from God. It rests upon the fact of the Risen Lord, on the combined proofs of the Word of God, of prayer, of the Church with its fellowship of the children of God, of the continuous witness of the Sacraments. The cumulative evidence of the seals without becomes the witness of the seal within. Subjectively it is the witness of the Spirit to the conscience, of justification; *with* the spirit, of adoption; *in* the soul, of sanctification. It is the assurance of faith for the present, of hope for the future, of understanding as underlying all. It is not in any way independent of the external seals and pledges. It receives its verification in the fruits of faith in daily life. There is the certitude of the inner man. 'Our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance,' 1 Th 1⁵ (*πληροφορία*, 'most certain confidence'—Grim); 'in full assurance (fulness, R.V.) of faith,' He 10²²; 'in full assurance (fulness, R.V.) of hope,' He 6¹¹; 'of the full assurance of understanding,' Col 2². There is also the expression of it in the outer life—there is a cheerful confidence, a holy boldness—a *παρρησία* for each *πληροφορία* in the New Testament; 'a boldness of faith,' He 4¹⁶, 1 Jn 5¹⁴; 'of hope,' He 10³⁵⁻³⁶, 1 Jn 2²⁸; 'of understanding,' 1 Tim 3¹³, 2 Co 3¹².

This assurance may accompany saving faith; it may succeed it. It is not saving faith itself. It is the confirming, attesting, witness of the life—the assurance of Sonship. As in John's First Epistle

the witnessing, indwelling, and renewing Spirit is often one and indistinguishable. The main point is that there is a *direct* witness of the Spirit, which is confirmed by the indirect witness of the conscience, on the evidence of a sincere life.

Wesley's doctrine of assurance is not visionary, fanciful, obscure. It is 'true' mysticism; it perfects and unfolds all the powers of the human spirit. To have an experimental acquaintance with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is a sure cure for all false forms of mysticism. Wesley broke with the Moravians because they undervalued the objective factors of Christianity. He was fully alive to the peril of that mysticism that sought to find absorption of the self in God. Wesley never undervalued man's individuality. He looked for all the marks that precede, accompany, and follow the true genuine testimony of the Spirit of God in the heart of the believer. Repentance, pardon, the new birth go before; joy in the Lord, humility, obedience accompany it; and the fruits of the Spirit follow it.

The authority of the Church as the conveyancer of the life in Christ was emphasized by Wesley. The new discovery of the authority of the individual heart came as a mental and moral shock to the whole corporate body of men. It quickened the intellect. Its effects have run on until, to-day, they have outrun the authority of the Church. The problem now is 'how to set the true limits to the individual!' The manward side of the value of individual experience has broadened out until the conception of the brotherhood of man has led him to forget his individual responsibility to God. We need to get back the Godward side of that great discovery. Man has claimed his own rights before giving 'unto God the things that are God's.' When we awaken to the misplacement of emphasis, and all that this misplacement entails, we shall also recover the essential truths that underly this doctrine of assurance—the authority of the Bible; the authority of the Church, 'the congregation of faithful men' (not the exaggerated authority of any section); the fact of God, of His holiness, His righteousness, His justice; the fact of the real judgment of God, the judgment now and the judgment to come; the fact of forgiveness, an abiding conscious witness in the soul of pardon, and power to live the new life; the true unfolding of individual life, the fact of all the infinite possi-

bilities of our complex individual existence that will develop into bud, and blossom, and fruit, as the Holy Spirit works in us, and through us, the will of God. John Wesley's doctrine of assurance

still gives us the best working explanation of a forgiven heart, and the 'passion' of a renewed will that can 'publish to the sons of men the signs infallible.'

The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF ISAIAH.

ISAIAH XL. 6-8.

'All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: the grass withereth, the flower fadeth; because the breath of the Lord bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.'

1. A MYSTERIOUS superhuman voice puts this cry into the prophet's lips. It is as though the rush and lapse of time itself became audible, and spoke its message to the thoughtless and fleeting generations of men. There are hours in life, solemn and critical for each of us, at which we are compelled again to hear it,—as when one year, or one century, passes into another, or when our dead pass from our side to their long home. The prophet's cry reverberates along the corridors of time from each generation and age to the next; our vanished years and the centuries of history take up the echo. They proclaim to us with one voice the transience of all earthly things, the abiding worth and undecaying power of the Word of the living God, and the safety and permanence alone of those hopes and interests of mankind which have their foundation and their warrant here. 'All flesh is grass'—brief and frail in duration as the green grass in yon burning eastern clime; and 'the goodliness thereof'—its bloom of beauty, its flush of pleasure, its pride of strength or wealth—more fleeting still, as the flower that withers while the grass is green! The inspired figure is touchingly reproduced by one of our English poets:

Look at the fate of summer flowers,
Which blow at daybreak, droop ere evensong;
And grieved for their brief date, confess that ours,
Measured by all we are and ought to be,
Measured by all that trembling we foresee,
Is not so long!

2. In contrast with the perishing life of the great Empire city and its vast populations, Isaiah points to 'the word of our God.' That Word, he says, will 'stand for ever.' While man, living in the flesh, with his finite being, his limited powers, his decaying strength, recalls the withering grass and the fading flower, the Word of our God rises up like corn in the ear, and is, as it were, embodied before the spiritual eye of man; it neither fades nor withers; it endures for ever; it justifies itself at the bar of history and throughout all time.

3. St. Peter detaches this text from its historical setting, and gives it a universal application. When he reminds Christians that they are born again, and that a regenerate man has a new life and a new standard of duty before him, he adds that this new birth has been effected, 'not by corruptible seed, but by incorruptible, by the word of God, that liveth and abideth for ever.' And then he goes on to quote Isaiah with such variations as Apostles, conscious of their own inspiration, often felt at liberty to make when citing the Old Testament. 'All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: but the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And,' adds St. Peter, as if to prevent the quotation from suggesting nothing but historical or antiquarian lessons to his readers, 'this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.'

I.

THE DECAY OF NATURE.

1. The simile has a twofold force. It justifies, at first sight, and to a certain extent, the sympathy with human life, with its freshness, variety, beauty, which was felt by captive Israel. What is more beautiful than a single blade of grass, if we look