

50 Articles of War

GEORGE SCOTT RAILTON

ABOUT REPENTANCE

The Christian Mission Magazine, September 1874

Is there an act required of men called repentance? There certainly was a time when God commanded all men to repent; but from what we hear from many today, one would naturally suppose that the time for repentance is past and gone. Indeed, there are people who go so far as to condemn repentance, and who are never tired of urging the importance of laying “deadly doing down;” in which “deadly doing” they include repentance as one of the deadliest and most ruinous doings of men.

So clear are the commands to repent all through God's Word, so numerous and so detailed are the repentances recorded in the histories and in the Psalms, and so evident is the need of repentance to every thoughtful mind, that it would seem absurd to argue for it were it not for the persistence of many in denying the need of it. We cannot imagine that any one, however, could gainsay the necessity of repentance, except from confusion of thought or confusion of terms on the subject, and it is, therefore, of the greatest importance to express clearly what is true on this vital question,

WHAT IS REPENTANCE?

We fear the world has been kept very much in the dark on this subject through the use of this word of Latin derivation, instead of the plain Saxon “turning back,” which would convey at once to every mind the whole meaning of repentance.

There are only two ways of living, two ways of thinking, feeling, and acting—the one pleasing to God, according to His will, and leading to heaven, the other displeasing to God, breaking His laws, and ending in hell. Every human being naturally starts in the latter course, and none but those who turn back can ever reach the City of God. Can anything be simpler than this? How can any man fail to see that to get out of the wrong way into the right way we must retrace our



50 Articles of War

GEORGE SCOTT RAILTON

steps? This turning back on the part of man must necessarily affect his whole being, seeing that the mind, heart, and body of man, must all be traveling together, no matter on what road he journeys.

WHAT IS REPENTANCE OF MIND?

We know well what it is after dealing for years with some house of business to make up our mind to have done with it, and to buy elsewhere. New information has led us to turn away from that door, and to seek another. Just such a change of mind takes place when the soul that has long been traveling the downward course turns round, and begins to flee from the wrath to come. But mark, this is not salvation; it is only repentance. You may leave the shop that has given you underweight only to enter another where you are overcharged, and many, alas! who turn away from the empty world nowadays, are, we fear, deluded into the acceptance of a false peace, which will cost them an eternity of woe.

It is customary with some constantly to teach that "there is life for a look at the crucified One." So, thank God, there is; but no one can take that saving look at Christ while their backs are still turned upon Him; no one can get a fine view of what is behind them by looking over their shoulder. We can most of us remember the pleasure we had in childhood's days in running backwards, especially when running on some soft footing, where frequent tumbles were of no consequence. We can also remember that next to the pleasure of the runner was that of the onlooker, who could see the zigzag course which the other necessarily took. We have, doubtless, a lively recollection of the fatigue this attempt at reversing the order of nature produced; but which of us can remember a journey of importance performed successfully backwards? No, no; common sense should assure everyone that a man does not come to Jesus till he has first turned his back upon the devil. There must be a complete change of mind before there can be a change of conduct.

WHAT IS REPENTANCE OF HEART?

Ah, how common an experience amongst men, even in relation to their everyday affairs! "How is the gold become dross?" might we not truly say of the cherished treasures of many a heart. Men toil and long and weary themselves in seeking something which when found their poor weary hearts turn from with



50 Articles of War

GEORGE SCOTT RAILTON

loathing, until, by-and-by, we have, alas! too often either the abandonment of every lofty aim, or despair and suicide.

Perhaps no one so frequently and so terribly presents us with a picture of heart repentance as the poor drunkard. The night of his revelry and sinful pleasure past, he wakes to find out how low his folly has sunk him, and how baseless were the frenzied joys of his night's debauch. The exhilarating influence of the drink gone, he sees himself the poor wreck of human nature, the sport of folly and of every weak impulse. His head aches, and his heart grows sick at the sight of his misery, until, goaded by the pangs of his physical and moral nature alike, he starts on the desperate errand of drowning his senses again, or even of drowning himself.

Such is precisely the condition of every truly repenting sinner's heart when he sees his vileness, and sees how far he is from hope, and happiness, and God. But, alas! how seldom, comparatively, do we hear and see men and women thus filled with shame and sorrow on account of their sins! When such an one comes trembling, groaning, and weeping to the foot of the Cross, the very professors of religion stare and say, "Oh, what excitement!" Would to God there were more of it! More of it now—more of it at once, for there will be plenty of it by-and-by when it is too late for ever.

Not that we would for a moment attempt to prescribe the depth and length and breadth of the godly sorrow that repentance unto life worketh. "the heart knoweth its own bitterness," and no one can say to that extent a man is sorry for his sins. But whether the anguish convulse the whole nature, or be scarcely visible without; whether it last a few moments only, or endure for months, there must be this turning back of the heart from sin and death ere a man will seek the only Savior. It is perfectly true that sorrow for sin will not save a man, and there is no merit about such sorrow. There is no merit about the downcast looks, the tears, and sighs, of the child who disobeyed his parents, nor will they in themselves save him from punishment; but forgiveness can neither be granted nor received—even if pronounced by foolishly indulgent lips—forgiveness cannot be realized, by that child until it has first felt the frown of a convicted offender. And, doubtless, in most cases where we find people reckoning themselves Christians, and yet admitting that they have not the witness of the pardon of their sins, the truth is that there never has been the earnest sorrow of



50 Articles of War

GEORGE SCOTT RAILTON

the penitent night of weeping, which must precede the morning joy of reconciliation.

WHAT IS PRACTICAL REPENTANCE?

Call it, if you please, repentance of life or of conduct; a turning back in practice from sin to right-doing. Not that a man must, in order to gain Salvation, begin "to do well." That is impossible; for "he that is in the flesh cannot please God;" but before a man can be saved he must "leave off to do evil." He must, in fact, commit himself to a life of resistance to his old master—the devil—and of obedience to God, whom he has, up to this time, treated as his enemy. Now it is just this committing oneself to God's side which men are, above all things, loth to do. Under the mighty influence of the Holy Ghost men cannot avoid such an enlightenment of the mind as almost compels the formation of good resolutions, and such a softening of the heart as almost amounts to grief on account of sin; but when the question comes home to the will—Shall I yield or not? alas! how many millions turn away their faces from Jesus and plunge into deeper darkness, rather than turn round and follow Him. To meet this case, so fearfully common, the devil has invented one of his most plausible and most heartless lies—"not today," words in which countless myriads of the hearers of the Word yearly pronounce their own doom.

To retreat is a disgrace against which human nature universally revolts. It is a total denial of oneself, a self-abasement which strikes at every idol in the heart's temple at once. To say, publicly, "I have sinned, entreat the Lord for me," is bad enough; but even proud Pharaoh got so far, again and again. But the most terrible of all the plagues of Egypt were necessary to lead him to abandon his sinful course and let the Lord have His way; and then the consequences of the submission were no sooner realized than Pharaoh, like millions of little-earth hearers of today, repented of his repentance, and went forth to fight with God again—and to die. When generals are beaten and have to return from the foe, they never "retreat" if it can be avoided. They "execute strategic movements," or "reorganize their forces," or "await reinforcements in strong positions;" anything, rather than confessedly *turn back*. Just so with sinners; seeing and feeling their guiltiness and need of salvation, they will do anything rather than turn round before men and publicly admit that their life, so far, has been wrong,



50 Articles of War

GEORGE SCOTT RAILTON

and that they have been on the way to hell. Alas! how many will be for ever degraded by this fatal pride to the lowest depths of horror and darkness!

Let us at least warn our fellow men always, and in all possible plainness, of the necessity of turning back to God with full purpose of heart. The more deceit prevails amongst religious teachers, the more unfashionable it becomes to demands of all men everywhere, in God's name, a thorough humbling of themselves before Him, the more let us insist upon this requirement of common sense as well as of Scripture.

To pretend that men inquire after salvation before they feel their own danger of destruction, to talk of men "believing the word of God," when it tells of Christ's love for sinners, before they have felt their own sinfulness, is to mock the intelligence of an average child. If the word of God be true at all, then we are all "by nature the children of wrath"—of God's wrath, on account of our abominable doings. Ere that wrath can pass from us we must drink to the dregs the cup of trembling before our God, for however men may trifle with themselves and one another, they cannot mock God. The man who has sown to the flesh—and who has not?—will as surely reap corruption as there is a God in heaven, unless, becoming thoroughly conscious of the wickedness of his past sowing, he confesses it, giving it up, and asking God's forgiveness for it. There is no way of escape but one. Every human being must turn back to God, or go on to the devil. May God help us ever to sound aloud a clear trumpet-warning on the subject to our poor, wandering fellow-men!

The world is willing to hear a great deal about the excellence of Christ, the salvation of humanity, the elevating influence of Christianity, the value of religion, and so forth; but to tell men that they are all condemned criminals, who must repent or die for ever—all that is rant and enthusiasm. The world strongly objects to such teaching—hates it, in fact—and will, we trust, always hate us as its faithful witnesses. God grant us grace to stand by the truth, and "having done all, to stand"! Amen.