

The
William Booth
Collection

FISHING FOR MEN 3

NOVEMBER, 1909

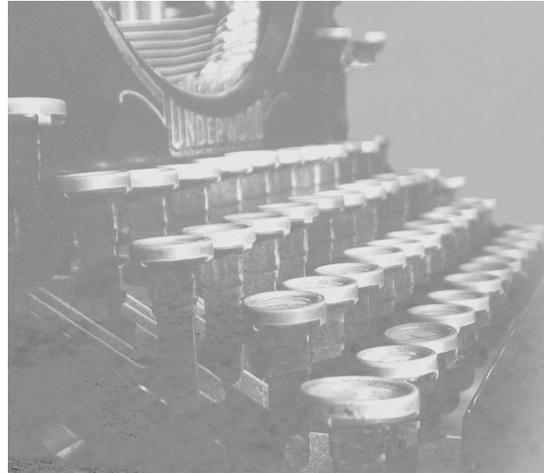
OBJECTIONS TO THE PENITENT-FORM

With many, I suppose that all the way through the struggle which takes place about Salvation in such Meetings as we are describing, there will be more or less objections made to the Penitent-form. This is not surprising; indeed, it is to be expected that the world, the flesh and the Devil should cry out against it, for there is nothing in the outward form of religion that can be much more distasteful to this trinity than the Penitent-form. The reasons for it are not very far to seek, seeing that it is a definite step taken before Heaven, earth and Hell, committing men to the renunciation of sin and the abandonment of the world, and pledging them to the service of God.

It signifies an open decision for Christ. It constitutes the very act of 'cutting off the right hand' and 'plucking out 'the right eye.' It means leaving all to follow Jesus Christ; the presentation of the body a living sacrifice; the going out from the world and the separation from it; the starting to walk with God, and to live a holy life.

Men will be Willing to hear about renouncing sin and giving up the world to any extent you like, if you go no further than the talking and advising. They will be willing to sing and pray about it, to read good books, to hear sermons, and even to preach them, but when it comes to the act which pledges them to carry out all that they profess to believe they will shrink back. It is like marriage to a great many people. They will talk and flirt and write letters, but when it comes to the ceremony itself, they hesitate; they don't want to be bound for life. They object to that, and see many difficulties in the way, real or imaginary.

The objections made to the Penitent-form are various. But most of them are very readily answered. The majority consist in the indecision of the mind, the clinging to some sin, or the unwillingness to engage in some duty which they feel they will have to perform if they honestly give themselves up to follow Christ.



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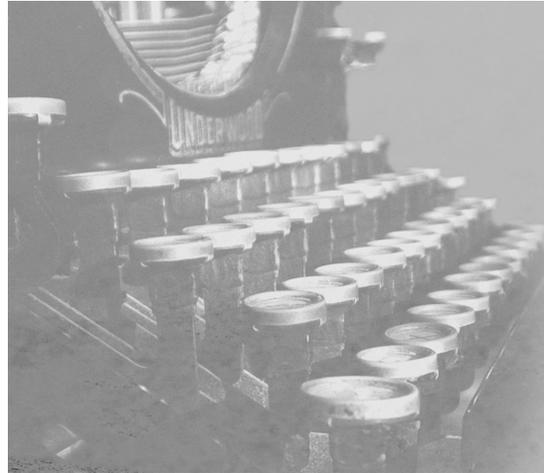
In many the objection to go forward is mainly the result of natural timidity. They don't like to walk up before the people. They object to make pledges so openly for fear that they should not be able to keep them. They are naturally nervous and reluctant to exhibit themselves before the people as entering upon a new course. They would like to do something. They want to get saved, but they prefer the quietest Way; they say that they prefer to go to their own chamber and ask God to save them there.

Others will say they don't see the use of the Penitent-form. You can reply, as we have already intimated, that there is no merit in it, but that it will be useful as a test, showing whether they are really willing to give up sin and serve God. It will prove to the man himself and to those about him, whether he has made up his mind on the question.

It will show whether a man is really in earnest. I have often asked people when they have been hesitating and holding back from: going out to the Form, 'Do you want to be saved?' If they answered, 'Yes,' I have asked again, 'Are you willing to Walk across the Hall, and kneel down at that Penitent-form and accept salvation?' If they have answered, 'No,' I have gone on to say, 'Well, now, you see that you are not very anxious. You don't Want this blessing very much when you are not willing to go a few yards to secure it, although Jesus Christ came all the way from Heaven to earth to save you.'

You can urge that the Penitent-form is very useful as a convenience to those who want to assist them. We can help with our counsels, and faith and prayer those who will come to the Penitent-form, whereas it would be impossible to do so if scattered all over the building, seeing, if we could get at them, We should not know who were anxious and who were not.

The Penitent-form is useful in as much as it presents the opportunity for confession. When a man walks out and kneels down there, he says to all his neighbors and friends, 'I have been Wrong. I am sorry and ashamed of myself. I am going to give myself up to seek grace and strength from God to enable me to do better.' If a man is not willing to do this, I don't see how he can be put down as truly repenting of his sins before God.



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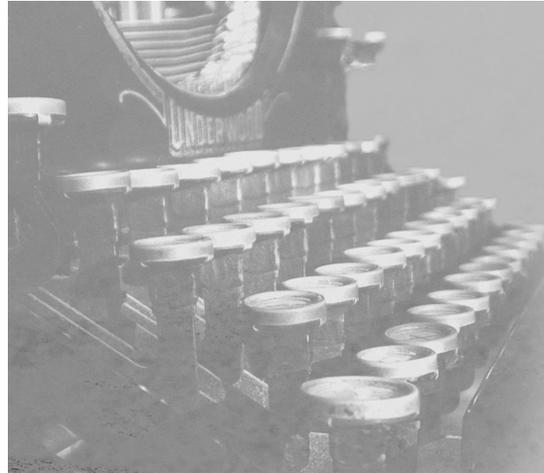
The Penitent-form is useful as an encouragement to others. When one man goes forward it is likely to have a great effect upon others, and when people want to do right themselves, they will be willing to make some effort to induce other people to do the same.

People will say that the Penitent form is not mentioned in the Bible. There is no command that they are to go out, kneel down, and seek Salvation. But you can reply that if the command is not there in the letter it is in the spirit. In fact, you can say that the open acknowledgment of sin and the avowed determination to follow Christ is the essence of religion.

People will say that they can be saved elsewhere. And you can reply, 'Yes.' That nothing was ever said to the contrary. That God is no respecter of places. That He is just as willing to save on one spot as another, But you can urge that if a man is not willing to go anywhere to secure his salvation you can't see how God can save him until he is. It is not the position of a man's body, but the state of his mind that God looks at; and that, until he is properly humbled and willing to go down before God, and to acknowledge himself as a helpless, hopeless sinner, and to openly accept of Christ, he cannot have Salvation. Except a man be converted and become as a little child (that is to say, until he is docile and obedient), he cannot go into the Kingdom of Heaven.

With many people it will be nothing more or less than pride which keeps them from the open avowal of their need of mercy. Oh, the numbers I have heard say, 'I shall never go to that Penitent-form. I can be saved without that!' Oh, how many 'I have seen rise from their seats, and, with the loftiest disdain, march off declaring that they will never go down at 'that Form!' And, oh, the numbers of these I have afterwards seen weeping in the deepest humiliation at the same despised place!

When sinners are evidently kept back on this account, I have often pressed the enquiry whether it is not better to go to 'that Form' trampling on their pride, than to go away treading under foot the precious Blood that was shed for them on the Cross?



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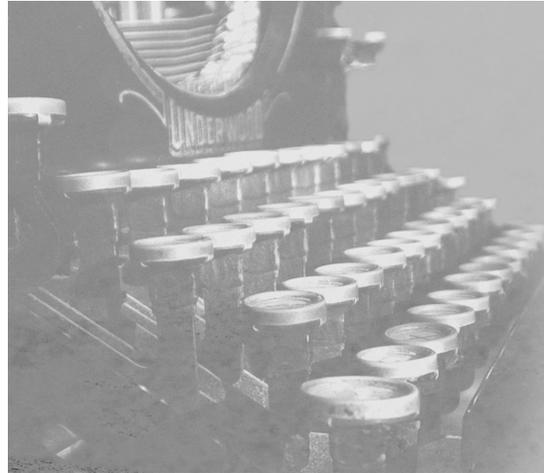
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The 'Fishers' should not stay all through the meeting with the same person; anyway, they should not stay too long. My custom has been to pass from one individual to another. If a person has not appeared to have any particular conviction as to the importance of his Salvation, I have endeavored to say something that seemed likely to impress him and afford food for reflection, and then lifting up my heart to God in prayer on his behalf have passed on to some one else, and coming back to him again by-and-by. But of late I have seen wonderful things done by sticking to a sinner right on, regardless of all else besides, and not giving in until the victory has been won.

Where there is plenty of help this may be a good plan; but when the workers are only limited I think it will be found most profitable to pass on, and so deal with a larger number of individuals. Of course, when a soul is broken up and in the throes of the struggle with difficulties, or sins, or fears, or devils, and yet cannot summon up courage to break through and come out, they ought not to be left until the victory is declared on Jesus' side, and the soul is safely delivered out of the hands of the enemy. In such cases the violence of faith and prayer and perseverance must be called into lay and kept in exercise.

I must always remember, however, that one person coming forward has a powerful influence upon others, and will often do more than a night's arguments would; consequently, it will be the wisest to take the most likely cases first; and until the 'Fisher' has looked through his section of the building he cannot tell the amount of preparedness that he will find. My counsel, therefore is that the wisest course will be for him to pass from one person to another, and then settle down to lay siege to those who seem the nearest to decision. But in this, as in other things, he will be guided by the Holy Spirit.

The Penitent-form is of no use without decision. As a rule, no permanent benefit will be gained by dragging people out of the Penitent form until they have really made up their minds to give up sin and serve God. There is no salvation without repentance; there is no repentance without a turning round from all known sin and the willingness to do the will of God so far as it is made known.



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Unless a man or woman has reached this stage of feeling and intention, the Penitent-form will be of little service if any at all. Of course, unknown to us, the sinner may make the coming to the Penitent-form a test to his own soul of full surrender. He may be saying, 'If I go there I must give up my sin and go in for serving God, and when I go there I will do it. When the 'Fisher' has any idea that this is the case, the penitent should be got to the Form with all urgency and all speed, and with any reasonable amount of compulsion.

Still I have always made it a point of pushing the sinner up to decision in his seat. While there I have poured on him the vials of God's wrath and wooed him with the oil and wine of His mercy and loving-kindness. I have talked about the Judgment Day and the agony of Gethsemane, the Wrath to come, and the Blood of the Cross, until he has professed his willingness to give up every evil thing, and when this decision has been arrived at I have found little difficulty in getting him to the mercy-seat.