

## **AN EMINENT BAPTIST'S AVOWAL.**

John Foster, the eminent Baptist minister of long ago, wrote to a young minister (See, his Life and Correspondence, – London edition) thus: –

"Endless punishment! I acknowledge my inability (I would say it reverently) to admit this belief, together with a belief in the divine goodness – the belief that "God is love;" that "his tender mercies are over all his works." Goodness, benevolence, charity ascribed in supreme perfection to him, cannot mean a quality foreign to all human conception of goodness; it must be something analogous in principle to what he himself has defined and required as goodness in his moral creatures, that in adoring the divine goodness we may not be worshiping an "unknown God." But if so, how would all our ideas be confounded, while contemplating him bringing, of his own sovereign will, a race of creatures into existence in such a condition that they certainly will and must, – by their nature and circumstances, go wrong and be miserable, unless prevented by especial grace, – which is the privilege of only a small proportion of them; and at the same time affixing on their delinquency a doom of which it is infinitely beyond the highest archangel's faculty to apprehend a thousandth part of the horror....

"A number (not large, but of great piety and intelligence) of ministers within my acquaintance, several now dead, have been disbelievers of the doctrine in question; at the same time not feeling themselves imperatively called upon to make a public disavowal; content with employing in their ministrations strong general terms in denouncing the doom of impenitent sinners.

"For one thing, a consideration of the unendurable imputations and unmeasured suspicions apt to be cast on any publicly declared practical defection from rigid "orthodoxy" has made them think they

would better consult their usefulness by not giving prominence to this dissentient point while yet they make no concealment of it in private communications and in answers to serious inquiries. When, besides, they have considered how strangely defective and feeble is the efficacy of the terrible doctrine itself, to alarm and deter careless, irreligious minds, they have [R1150 : page 6] thought themselves the less required to propound one that so greatly qualifies the blackness of the prospect. They could not be unaware of the grievous truth of what is so strongly insisted on as an argument by the defenders of the tenet – that thoughtless and wicked men would be sure to seize on the mitigated doctrine to encourage themselves in their impenitence. But this is only the same perverse and fatal use that they make of the doctrine of grace and mercy through Jesus Christ. If they will so abuse the truth we cannot help it. But methinks even this fact tells against the doctrine in question. If in the very nature of man as created, every individual, by the Sovereign Power, be in such desperate disorder that there is no possibility of conversion and salvation in the instances where that power interposes with a special and redeeming efficacy, how can we conceive that the main proportion of the race thus morally impotent (that is really and absolutely impotent) will be eternally punished for the inevitable result of this moral impotence?"

Probably *some* excuse should be made for such uncandid conduct as this frank avowal indicates, because the morning had not yet begun to dawn; yet we cannot hold a Christian minister blameless in preaching and outwardly supporting a doctrine, which at heart, and in private, he denied as unreasonable, and a calumny against God's character. Years ago the light upon God's Word and the helps in its study were much less than now, when surely no one is very excusable for lacking a knowledge of the clear, reasonable and consistent teaching of the Bible on this subject – one in which every text, parable, symbol and dark saying finds a reasonable solution.

Though John Foster lacked the "helps" and felt that some of the passages of the Bible (especially the modern translations, made by

men who held this popular error) seemed, in symbolic language, to favor the popular theory of the eternal torment of all mankind except the saints, he should have been true to his own convictions; he should not have professed to believe, nor have attempted to teach, to any extent whatever, what he affirmed he did not and could not force himself to believe.

He should have avowed candidly and publicly his disbelief and taken the consequences. And he should have begun a thorough and systematic study of the subject, from the Bible standpoint; seeking for the light necessary to harmonize the figurative and symbolic and parabolic passages with the plain and reasonable revelation of God's character. Had he thus hungered and thirsted after righteousness [after right – truth,] who will say that he would have been turned away empty and uncertain, when the Lord declares that such "shall be filled." Had he thus sought and knocked at the Lord's treasury of wisdom, who will affirm that it would have remained a "sealed" book (Isa. 29:11-14) to him, when the Lord declares that he that seeketh findeth, and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. – Matt. 7:7.

Yes, "blessed are they" who are thus honest and earnest; – they shall be filled, and the treasure house shall be opened to them: but those not thus disposed, lose a great blessing from God while keeping the favor and honor of men and holding comfortable situations.

John Foster says that he and others feared *loss* of influence, "usefulness," and the addition of "unendurable imputations." It is the old story: They had consecrated their lives (as every true Christian has done) to God's service, agreeing to be "living sacrifices;" yet, when the time came, when there was an opportunity to suffer for Christ's sake, they feared the suffering – the dying daily. These are evidently of the class mentioned by Paul, "who through fear of death [the sacrificial dying, as *living* sacrifices] are all their life-time subject to *bondage*." Such will be saved so as by fire; they will be part of the Second Company who will serve *before* the throne with

palm branches (Rev. 7:14,15); but they are not, so far as we may judge from their own profession, worthy of a place in that "little flock" of overcomers who shall reign with Christ.

We may draw some of our most useful lessons from the failure and confessions of others, if careful to gauge our lessons by God's testimony, the Bible. This lesson to each one seeking to please God and to be blessed and honored of Him (now with a knowledge of His plan and by and by with a share in the Kingdom which will execute that plan) is, Be honest toward God, toward yourself and toward your fellow-creatures; profess and teach only what you fully believe; and hunger, thirst, **[R1150 : page 7]** seek, and knock for the truth at God's great store-house – the Bible. If God does not send the key to you direct, he will at least put you in contact with some of the servants who have the keys, and who, as his and your servants, are engaged in bringing forth things *new and old* – meat in due season for the household of faith. – Matt. 24:45; 13:52.

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