



The
Catherine Booth
Collection

HIGHWAY OF OUR GOD

PART II: TREADING THE HIGHWAY

CHAPTER SIX: Formalism or Grace

I HAVE chosen to inquire into the principle of adaptation as applied to the gospel. No person can imagine for a moment that we would hold or teach adaptation of the gospel itself. We deem this so above any change that we would not be responsible for transposing its order, much less altering its matter, so sacredly intact do we believe the gospel of Christ ought to be. We believe also that the order of God ought to be strictly maintained, that it is as rational and true in philosophy as it is in divinity and that the way the Spirit operates upon the minds of men is just the same as ever. When we come to speak of modes and measures, that is quite another thing. A most easily fathered truth running through the New Testament is, that forms and ceremonies are nothing except as they embody and express real spiritual life and truth. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; baptism is nothing, and being baptized is nothing; the Lord's supper is nothing, and abstaining from the Lord's supper is nothing—nothing in themselves as matters of form. Embraced under circumcision are all mere outward forms and ceremonies; all are nothing, save keeping the commandments of God.

Now, it was the crowning condemnation of the Jews that they had frittered away the spirituality and practical bearing of divine law, clinging to those forms and ceremonies which were instituted only to embody and symbolize it.

They had better have come out and avowed themselves as unbelievers than have gone on professing to be the children of God while they were doing the work of the devil. But they would not receive this teaching. They held on to the form whilst the spirit had gone. They would make clean the outside of the . . . platter but within they were 'full of extortion and excess appearing beautiful outwardly, but within they were full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness.'

Alas! there is this tendency still in our fallen human nature. It is so much easier, or Satan makes it look so much easier, to an unregenerate man to rest in a form than to seek till he finds the spiritual grace which that form represents. It is so much easier than bringing his evil, unregenerate heart to God for Him to circumcise it and write His law in it, as He promises to do under the new covenant. God wants every man to bring his heart to Him, and let Him renew it.



The
Catherine Booth
Collection

HIGHWAY OF OUR GOD

How many thousands in so-called Christian England today are just there. They have the form; like the Jews, they are Pharisees with a Christian creed instead of a Jewish, the same in character, only different in name. They hang on to the creed of Jesus Christ, while they know nothing of the spirit; they have the form without the power. As in the individual there is this tendency to rest in form, so in the Church collectively. With the Jews their Temple service and the paraphernalia of Judaism was all in all to them, and they thought that Jesus Christ was the most awfully severe and uncharitable Person who had ever appeared on the face of the earth, because He told them the truth. We are very largely in the same condition as the Jews were when Christ came. There are, I know, grand and glorious exceptions; but I speak of the great whole, and I am backed up in this opinion by some most thoughtful and spiritual men.

What is to be done? There is no improving the future without disturbing the present, and the difficulty is to get people to be willing to be disturbed. We are so conservative by nature and feel such a rooted dislike to having anything rooted up or knocked down. It is as much the work of God, however, 'to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy,' as 'to build, and to plant,' and God's real ambassadors frequently have to do as much of the one as of the other. We have the accumulated traditionalism of ages to dig under, and it takes considerable force of character and a great deal of the Spirit of God to enable us to do it.

The law of adaptation is the only law in the New Testament with respect to modes and measures. While the gospel message is laid down with unerring exactness, we are left at perfect freedom to adapt our measures and modes of bringing it to bear upon men to the circumstances, times and conditions in which we live. 'I am made all things to all men.' declared the great apostle to the Gentiles who had thrown off the paraphernalia of Judaism years before, yet became as a Jew that he might win the Jews.

The great strong intellect became as a weak man that he might win the weak. He conformed himself to the conditions and circumstances of his hearers in all lawful things that he might win them; he let no mere conventionalities or ideas of propriety stand in his way when it was necessary to abandon them. He who was brave as a lion, and hailed a crown of martyrdom like a conquering hero, was willing to submit to anything when the requirements of his mission rendered it necessary.

Now here it seems to me that the Church—I speak universally—has made the grand mistake of exalting the traditions of the elders into the same importance and authority as the word of God.



The
Catherine Booth
Collection

HIGHWAY OF OUR GOD

People contend that we must have quiet, proper, decorous services. I say, Where is your authority for this? I defy any man to show it. I have a great deal more authority for such a lively, gushing, spontaneous, and what you call disorderly, service, as our Salvation Army services sometimes are, in the fourteenth chapter of First Corinthians than you can find for yours. The best insight we have into the internal working of a religious service in apostolic times is in this chapter, and I ask you, Is it anything like the ordinary services of today?

We cannot get the order of a single service from the New Testament, nor can we get the form of government of a single church. Hence one denomination thinks theirs is the best form, and another theirs; so Christendom has been divided into various camps ever since; but this very quarrelling shows the impossibility of getting from the New Testament the routine, the order and the fashion of mere modes. Do you think God had no purpose in this omission? The forms, modes and measures are not prescribed as in the Old Testament dispensation. Why?

The principle is laid down that you are to adapt your measures to the necessity of the people to whom you minister; you are to take the gospel to them in such modes and habitudes of thought and expression and circumstances as will gain a hearing. You are to preach to them in such a way as will cause them to look and listen. What scope for the various manifestations of the Spirit! The argument that this free operation of the Spirit has been abused is no argument against it, for then you might argue against every privilege. Here is abundant evidence that these Corinthian converts had opportunity to witness for Jesus, each one to give forth the gushing utterance of his soul, and tell other people of the experience which the Holy Ghost had wrought in him.

And look at the result! 'If . . . there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all: and thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth.' What unkind things have been said of The Salvation Army because people at our meetings have fallen on their faces under the convicting power of the Spirit. But you see this is apostolic.

Should we not pray to be set free from the traditionalism and routinism in which Satan has succeeded in lulling us to sleep? It was only the repressing, and ultimately, I am afraid, the all-but extinguishing, of the Holy Spirit's urgings that has led to the dead way in which many services are conducted.



The
Catherine Booth
Collection

HIGHWAY OF OUR GOD

I maintain that the only indispensable qualification for witnessing for Christ is the Holy Ghost. Paul expressly, over and over again, abjures all mere human equipment. He expressly declares that these things were not the power even where they existed, but that it was the Holy Ghost. Therefore, give me man, woman or child with the Holy Ghost, full of love and zeal for God, and I say it would be a great strength and joy to that convert to testify to the church and to the world, and it would be the bounden duty of the church to give him or her the opportunity to do so. The Lord is not going to evangelize this land by finished sermons and disquisitions, but by the simple testimony of people saved from sin and the devil, by His power and His grace. He is going to do it as He began, by witnessing.

Read your New Testament and you will be struck with the amazing amount of evidence for this unconventional kind of service. When shall Peters and Marys be so filled with the Spirit that they cannot help telling what God has done for them, like the woman of Samaria who, when she had found Him of whom Moses and the Prophets had written, went and fetched her fellow-townsmen and women to hear Him? The way in which the Lord is going to gather out his great and glorious kingdom in these latter days is by the power of testimony in the Holy Ghost.

The Master Himself adopted these very measures. I was much struck with this when someone said, 'Why, you are sending people to preach who cannot read or write!' For a moment I was staggered, but I asked Him, 'How many of the apostles do you suppose could read and write when they were first sent out?' And then it was the questioner's turn to be staggered. There is no reason to suppose that, with but two or three exceptions, any of them could. Education then was far more uncommon than it is now. It was not reading and writing that was the great qualification for preaching Christ; it was knowing and seeing. It was not the power of eloquence, but being able to cast out devils that was the test. Give me somebody able to cast out devils, and I don't care whether they can read or write or put a grammatical sentence together.

Why did not Jesus Christ call the doctors and scribes of his day? There were plenty of them—highly educated men with trained and disciplined minds. He acted on the law of adaptation. He wanted His gospel preached to the great masses—not to the select few. How was He to have his gospel so preached, but by men like unto themselves? They would not listen to the doctors, and they will not now. It may be very wicked and obstinate and foolish, but such is the fact—they never have, and they never will.



The
Catherine Booth
Collection

HIGHWAY OF OUR GOD

Hence Jesus Christ chose the weak things of the earth to confound the mighty. He would, in the other case, have been obliged to have all those scribes and doctors untaught almost all they had learned, and so set them free from the bonds of tradition. He would have had to remould their minds, and then equip them. There was no necessity for this when He found the fishermen ready to His hand. They were just the men He wanted. They only required tempering with the Holy Ghost, and they were ready for the work. They thought as the people thought; they spoke with and associated with the people and, in fact, were of them. As He wanted the masses of men evangelized, He chose men from amongst the masses to evangelize them. Here was infinite wisdom. His purpose was that the gospel might be propagated in all climes and among all conditions of men, through any kind of agent—Greek, Jew, Barbarian, Scythian, man, woman, child. Any person who has experienced its power in the soul may go and speak of it to anybody who can be persuaded to hear them. Are there not teeming thousands round about you who live every day trampling his law under their feet? For Christ's sake, send somebody after them. If they will not have your doctors of divinity and your polished divines, get hold of fishermen and costermongers and send them. Let the people have a chance for their souls. Let them hear; for if they hear not, how shall they believe? Hundreds of men in this country were never in a place of worship, save to be christened or to be married, and a good many, sad to say, are living together without even being married. While we have been standing upon our dignity, whole generations have gone to Hell!—if the Bible is true. The whole work of redemption is a work of humiliation, self-sacrifice and suffering; and if we are not willing to follow Him in that, we may as well give up professing his name.

The Lord help us to go down amongst the fishermen, amongst the poor, the weak, the unlearned, the vulgar, to 'condescend to men of low estate.'