

# Why Good Men Change

Good men can and do change. They are changing these days at an alarming rate. Churches, theologians, theological seminaries, Christian Unions, Christian publishers, societies and magazines are far from what they once were. Christians are coy about once-accepted beliefs, and nothing seems able to escape the need for reappraisal. Bible versions, hymn books, the doctrine of eternal punishment, creation in six literal days, worship-styles, charismatic gifts, head-covering of female worshippers, methods of evangelism, separation from the world, the Moral Law and the Sabbath day are all being questioned now.

## **Esteemed**

Many of God's ministers, once esteemed "stedfast and immovable" have turned aside and failed this generation. One after another, they join the ranks of modifiers who have succumbed to the pressure for change. Once, we could assume that a man who was undeviating in his views would always be so. Sadly, this is no longer the case. Even last year's staunch brother is not bound to be the same today.

## **Why?**

Why do good men go this way - be they ministers or other influential Christians? What happens in their hearts to lead them to change? In what follows, I want to suggest answers to these questions. Our purpose is not smugly to score points over others: "Be not highminded, but fear" (Romans 11:20). These are solemn warnings to us. We need self-examination for now, repentance if we have turned aside, and watchfulness in the future.

## **Older**

The danger increases as we get older. Maturity can settle into complacency. Mellowness of age can become mellowness of outlook. In the place of sharp, clear views, woolly thinking and a slack hold of truth can come. A spiritual dotage sets in before we know it. Lot ended his days shamefully (Genesis 19:30-38). Gideon's later life was foolish and self-indulgent (Judges 8:27,30). "When Solomon was old," his heart turned away from the Lord (1 Kings 11:4). A whole generation of Israel left "the old paths, where is the good way" (Jeremiah 6:16). "An old prophet" lied and caused the death of a faithful prophet (1 Kings 13:11,18). The Galatians (Galatians 3:1), Demas (2 Timothy 4:10), Archippus (Colossians 4:17) and Christians at Ephesus (Revelation 2:4,5) remind us that finishing our course better than we began it is no easy thing. Andrew Bonar once said:

"It is a remark of old and experienced men that very few men, and very few ministers, keep up to the end the edge that was on their spirit at the first."

Who of us in the ministry does not shudder as we read these words! If we are spared, will the time of our retirement from the pastorate find us as zealous and uncompromising as when we began our ministry?

## **Signs**

Time does test our resolve to keep in a biblical track. Beginning well is one thing, and most do that. *Maintaining* our stance is something else. Telltale signs show we have changed. Our righteous indignation (Psalm 119:128) is tempered now by "practical considerations." Fear of being "divisive" hinders our facing vital issues (Galatians 1:10). Our Christian children, now grown-up, adopt new views, and what they think influences

us. We are more open to "try" new things in God's Church, rather than asking ourselves: "Is this authorised by Scripture?" We feel sensitive about our reputation instead of concerned solely for the glory of God (Hebrews 13:13). These can be indicators of spiritual decay: "Strangers have devoured his strength, and he knoweth it not: yea, gray hairs are here and there upon him, yet he knoweth not" (Hosea 7:9).

### **Success**

Apparent lack of success pressurises others to change. Almost the sorest trial is when God apparently does nothing through our labours, or in our church, whereas others employing carnal methods seem to enjoy success. Then Satan tempts us to consider alternatives, against our better judgment.

Let us remember, however, that God counts faithfulness and success as two different things. The first is always required, but the second is only sometimes given. We are accountable for faithfulness but not necessarily for success. The Master's word will be: "Well done, thou good and *faithful* servant" (Matthew 25:21; cf 1 Corinthians 4:2).

### **Faithfulness**

Is not faithfulness to God and truth a success that glorifies Him? This is a lot harder to maintain than elatedly reaping the harvest. Because "he that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much" (Luke 16:10), the Lord will richly reward those who have rendered to Him a fidelity that has endured when it was so hard. *And* that has refused to heed the voices of the new modernism.

### **Touchstone**

Outward results figure too largely in evangelicalism. It has been the touchstone of churches, men's ministries and Christians' lives for generations. We live in a climate that almost demands this as evidence that we are pleasing God and being relevant. While we are not indifferent to whether the Lord's work "appears" or not (Psalm 90:16), yet it remains true that no one is to be judged on outward results alone. What would this criterion do with men like Enoch, Noah, Obadiah (1 Kings 18:3), Isaiah (Isaiah 6:9-12), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:10), those in Malachi's day (Malachi 3:16), unknown believers in the troughs of church history, Samuel Rutherford (whose heaven would be two heavens if *one* soul from Anwoth met him there), Allen Gardiner, Jim Elliot and a host of others who never saw great results?

### **Revealed**

On the Day when all shall be revealed, the Lord will "try every man's work of what sort it is." Notice: "of what sort it is," not *how successful it has been*. In other words, the *quality* is what counts: "gold, silver, precious stones." So much that passes for success today will be nothing more than "wood, hay, stubble" - to be rejected and burnt up because it has disobedience to God in it (1 Corinthians 3:11-15). Better to offer God a few precious things that are real, than a heap of what is light and can last no longer than the Day of Judgment.

### **Blessing**

Related to this is our misunderstanding of what "blessing" is. We imagine it consists solely of conversions, church growth, affecting society with the gospel, etc. Undoubtedly these are *kinds* of blessing; where they are genuine, they are wrought by a sovereignly gracious God and we rejoice in them.

However, they are not the only blessings God gives. What about deep spirituality? What about reverence for the Word preached, and working it out in the church, in the home, at work, with our neighbour? What about suffering patiently under a heavy providence, proving God's promises and glorifying Him in the fires? What about Christ-likeness of character? Are these not blessings, and the triumphs of divine grace in human lives? Yet these are often ignored by modernisers in their hurry to "communicate the gospel," "get outsiders in," and present an image to the world. We are forgetting that the most credible image the world can see is a church where biblical Christianity flourishes in power. Woe to the minister or the church who overlooks this in a paranoid concern for "results."

### **Fellowship with God**

Malachi 2:6 gives us a portrait of a faithful minister:

“The law of truth was in his mouth, and iniquity was not found in his lips: he walked with me in peace and equity, and did turn many away from iniquity.”

Sandwiched between speaking God's truth and rescuing sinners is: "he walked with me." This is decisive for everything else. It reminds us that according to the quality of our fellowship with God will be our spiritual discernment, views and convictions. These are formed, either in the presence of God or by the prevailing climate of the day (Romans 12:1,2).

### **Spiritual bearings**

Put another way, spiritual instability comes about through loss of spiritual bearings. Only in the presence of God can we have the vantage point to see issues clearly: "In thy light shall we see light" (Psalm 36:9). Our Lord showed the same priority when He commissioned His disciples: "that they should *be with him*, and that he might send them forth to preach" (Mark 3:14). If "our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3), then everything else will be right.

Our relationship to the Holy Spirit, too, is crucial. In Isaiah 11:2,3 He is promised to Christ and His people as:

“the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD; and shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the LORD.”

The inward ministry of such a Teacher will give us all the spiritual wisdom and strength we need. He guides us into all truth and leads us into the ways of God's children. The credulous wobbling over every issue today may well be because ours is a generation guilty of grieving the Spirit of God.

### **Backsliding**

We need to ask ourselves this solemn question: Are the sad changes currently taking place due to backsliding? Departure from the Lord, to whatever degree, will mean He no longer gives clarity of thought and discernment. Lacking this divine grace, we catch the spirit of the age instead. The Lord, to chasten us, leaves us to ourselves and turns our wisdom into foolishness: "The backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways" (Proverbs 14:14 cf Psalm 44:18). Rather than the revamping of beliefs and methodology, might it not be a thoroughgoing repentance and return to the Lord that is needed?

## **Prayer life**

One's prayer life is crucial to all this. In "the secret of thy presence" (Psalm 31:20) we have secrets revealed to us (Psalm 25:14, cf vv.4,5). This equips us, instinctively, to try everything by the standard of Scripture. Bound to God's Word, we know what is truth and what are the right ways of the Lord, and we do not move an inch. However, what about the quality of our prayer life? A recent survey of 572 pastors in the United States showed that 57% pray less than 20 minutes a day and 34% pray for between 20 minutes and an hour. This means an average of 22 minutes daily prayer by spiritual leaders in the USA. No figures are available for the UK, but we fear the result would be little better.

## **Challenge**

Allowing that we can pray at other times besides the "closet" (1 Thessalonians 5:17), these findings challenge the present generation of Christians. If prayerful waiting upon God is the only vantage point from which to see things aright, what about present thinking and practice? Can modernisers claim that their convictions are the fruit of godliness, reverence for God's Word and much prayer? It does not seem so. When the *New International Version* was published in 1978, it was astonishing how quickly and naively ministers took their congregations over to it. Surely, with such a foundational matter as a translation of God's Word, nothing should have been done before *years* of careful study, prayer, and counsel from others.

The same unseemly haste happened in 1984 with *Mission Praise*. It soon became the supplement to hymn books in many churches, letting in charismatic choruses by the back door. We shall probably see this again with the new hymn book *Praise!* and so the downgrade continues. Christians and churches are so eager to jump onto the contemporary bandwagon that they are not even pausing to ask themselves where it is taking them. This is a generation that has little time to seek God's will and only seems to be asking itself "Will this get results?"

## **Our duty**

What is our duty, then, in the light of these things? How can we be kept from going the way of many in these days of confusion and unfaithfulness?

### **1. Let us seek the grace of perseverance**

Walking uprightly in this world is hard. It is also hard sometimes to walk uprightly in the Church. When we hear of the latest Reformed minister allowing a music band at the front to lead the worship, we can feel dismayed. We need to cry to God "Hold thou me up, and I shall be safe: and I will have respect unto thy statutes continually" (Psalm 119:117).

### **2. We must bring the eternal perspective to our witness, and keep viewing it in that light**

Not what we do and achieve but what we have and are will count in the end. The Lord will not blame us if we have been faithful but not successful. He will blame us if we have been unfaithful in trying to be successful. The coming Day will be all the vindication we need.

### **3. We need an experimental acquaintance with the truth**

God's Word, and the guidance it gives, is best learned when it brings blessing to our own souls. The Holy Spirit teaches us by comforting. He is called "the oil of

gladness" (Psalm 45:7) because He brings joy with His teaching. Often we think of our possessing the truth: even better is when it possesses us. Truth believed is one thing; truth felt and delighted in is another. When so, we shall be gladly under its government for everything, and not be influenced by the unbelieving, unspiritual pragmatism of our day.

4. **Let us be indifferent to what the world wants of the church**

The state of society today is driving many to think of little else than how to appeal to it with the gospel. This is a great challenge, we grant. However, society cannot and must not influence the way we serve God. If, for example, the worship He prescribes in Scripture does not appeal to the world, then the world must be changed, not God's worship. Nothing in the Church can be adjusted to suit contemporary culture without carnalising the Church. God will honour His own institutions. When He does this, the world is always affected for good on His terms and to His glory. This is our calling.

5. **We must not mind being in the minority**

Even among the Lord's people, the faithful sometimes have to tread a lonely path. Scripture and church history tell us that often the faithful have been the few. This is the price of adherence to principles too sacred to modify. However, obedience to God means we are with the great Majority. If the Lord smiles, it matters not who frowns. Moreover, fellowship with those of like mind will be all the deeper and more precious: "I am a companion of all them that fear thee, and of them that keep thy precepts" (Psalm 119:63).

6. **Let us keep looking up**

Faith means we look to God on His throne (Hebrews 11:27). Our belief in His sovereignty must not be a theory but a confidence. God reigns, He is doing all things well, He is having "His way in the whirlwind and in the storm" (Nahum 1:3). His will is supreme, His service is perfect freedom, and we are dependent upon Him alone for blessing. No blessing is worth having but what is given from heaven, and He has a set time to work. He encourages us to "not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not" (Galatians 6:9).

7. **Ultimately, our comfort can only be in God**

We are in danger of making so much of outward results that we subtly depend on them. If they are given, we are happy and carried forward by their momentum. If they do not materialise, we sink into discouragement and look about for new methods and ways. In other words, our comfort depends upon apparent success. We are controlled by it and have made a virtual god of it.

However, our joy must be in God, not in what He does, in the Giver and not His gifts. As Paul expressed it: "...God, whose I am, and whom I serve" (Acts 27:23). The order is significant: his relationship to God first (and all that meant) - then what he does for Him. When this is so, God will be our chief joy, whether in gospel success or in the day of small things. And if there seems nothing to show for all our hard work, God will still be our encouragement and comfort, for He alone does not change. It is reward enough to be pleased with Him, and He pleased with us. Godliness: the knowledge of God and satisfaction in God, will keep us consistent in these evil days.

In all the changes we see happening to men, let us not change. Happy is that Christian whose only changes are for the better, until the last change comes and he enters heaven to receive his eternal reward.

“My son, fear thou the LORD ... and meddle not with them that are given to change”  
(Proverbs 24:21).

O with thy tender mercies, Lord,  
    Us early satisfy;  
So we rejoice shall all our days,  
    And still be glad in thee.  
According as the days have been  
    Wherein we grief have had,  
And years wherein we grief have seen,  
    So do thou make us glad.

O let thy work and power appear  
    Thy servants' face before;  
And show unto their children dear  
    Thy glory evermore:  
And let the beauty of the Lord  
    Our God be us upon;  
And our hands' works establish thou,  
    Establish them each one.

(Psalm 90:14-17, metrical version)