

Attempts at the Impossible (December, 1888)

by C.H. Spurgeon

C.H. Spurgeon's sermon emphasizes the necessity of separating from those who reject essential truths of the Christian faith, even at the cost of unity.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 6:17, Galatians 1:6, Ephesians 4:3

Topics: "Doctrinal Purity", "Separation from Error"

Description

C.H. Spurgeon addresses the challenges of maintaining doctrinal purity within the London Baptist Association, emphasizing the necessity of separating from those who compromise essential truths of the faith. He critiques the attempts at unity that disregard fundamental beliefs, arguing that true fellowship cannot exist without a shared commitment to the core tenets of Christianity. Spurgeon warns against the dangers of compromising one's faith for the sake of unity, urging believers to stand firm in their convictions even if it means standing alone. He highlights the importance of recognizing when unity becomes impossible and the need to prioritize truth over mere association.

Transcript

FRIENDS will have noticed with interest the repeated debates in the London Baptist Association, as to whether there should be a "credal basis," and what that basis should be, if it were decided to have one. There seems to be a current opinion that I have been at the bottom of all this controversy, and if I have not appeared in it, I have, at least, pulled the wires. But this is not true. I have taken a deep interest in the struggles of the orthodox brethren; but I have never advised those struggles, nor entertained the slightest hope of their success.

My course has been of another kind. As soon as I saw, or thought I saw, that error had become firmly established, I did not deliberate, but quitted the body at once. Since then my one counsel has been, "Come ye out from among them." If I have rejoiced in the loyalty to Christ's truth which has been shown in other courses of action, yet I have felt that no protest could be equal to that of distinct separation from known evil. I never offered to the Union, or to the Association, the arrogant bribe of personal return if a creed should be adopted; but, on the contrary, I told the deputation from the Union that I should not return until I had seen how matters went, and I declined to mix up my own personal action with the consideration of a question of vital importance to the community.

I never sought from the Association the consideration of "a credal basis"; but on the contrary, when offered that my resignation might stand over till such a consideration had taken place, I assured the brethren that

what I had done was final, and did not depend upon their action in the matter of a creed. The attempt, therefore, to obtain a basis of union in the Association, whatever may be thought of it, should be viewed as a matter altogether apart from me, for so indeed it has been.

I may, however, venture to express the opinion, that the evangelical brethren in the Association have acted with much kindness, and have shown a strong desire to abide in union with others, if such union could be compassed without the sacrifice of truth. They as good as said--We think there are some few great truths which are essential to the reception of the Christian religion, and we do not think we should be right to associate with those who repudiate those truths. Will you not agree that these truths should be stated, and that it should be known that persons who fail to accept these vital truths cannot join the Association?

The points mentioned were certainly elementary enough, and we did not wonder that one of the brethren exclaimed, "May God help those who do not believe these things! Where must they be?" Indeed, little objection was taken to the statements which were tabulated, but the objection was to a belief in these being made indispensable to membership. It was as though it had been said, "Yes, we believe in the Godhead of the Lord Jesus; but we would not keep a man out of our fellowship because he thought our Lord to be a mere man.

We believe in the atonement; but if another man rejects it, he must not, therefore, be excluded from our number." Here was the point at issue: one party would gladly fellowship every person who had been baptized, and the other party desired that at the least the elements of the faith should be believed, and the first principles of the gospel should be professed by those who were admitted into the fellowship of the Association. Since neither party could yield the point in dispute, what remained for them but to separate with as little friction as possible?

To this hour, I must confess that I do not understand the action of either side in this dispute, if viewed in the white light of logic. Why should they wish to be together? Those who wish for the illimitable fellowship of men of every shade of belief or doubt would be all the freer for the absence of those stubborn evangelicals who have cost them so many battles. The brethren, on the other hand, who have a doctrinal faith, and prize it, must have learned by this time that whatever terms may be patched up, there is no spiritual oneness between themselves and the new religionists.

They must also have felt that the very endeavor to make a compact which will tacitly be understood in two senses, is far from being an ennobling and purifying exercise to either party. The brethren in the middle are the source of this clinging together of discordant elements. These who are for peace at any price, who persuade themselves that there is very little wrong, who care chiefly to maintain existing institutions, these are the good people who induce the weary combatants to repeat the futile attempt at a coalition, which, in the nature of things, must break down.

If both sides could be unfaithful to conscience, or if the glorious gospel could be thrust altogether out of the question, there might be a league of amity established; but as neither of these things can be, there would seem to be no reason for persevering in the-attempt to maintain a confederacy for which there is no justification in fact, and from which there can be no worthy result, seeing it does not embody a living truth. A desire for unity is commendable. Blessed are they who can promote it and preserve it!

But there are other matters to be considered as well as unity, and sometimes these may even demand the first place. When union becomes a moral impossibility, it may almost drop out of calculation in arranging

plans and methods of working. If it is clear as the sun at noon that no real union can exist, it is idle to strive after the impossible, and it is wise to go about other and more practicable business. There are now two parties in the religious world, and a great mixed multitude who from various causes decline to be ranked with either of them.

In this army of intermediates are many who have no right to be there; but we spare them. The day will, however, come when they will have to reckon with their own consciences. When the light is taken out of its place, they may have to mourn that they were not willing to trim the lamp, nor even to notice that the flame grew dim. The party everywhere apparent has a faith fashioned for the present century--perhaps we ought rather to say, for the present month. The sixteenth century gospel it derides, and that, indeed, of every period except the present most enlightened era.

It will have no creed because it can have none: it is continually on the move; it is not what it was yesterday, and it will not be tomorrow what it is today. Its shout is for "liberty," its delight is invention, its element is change. On the other hand, there still survive, amid the blaze of nineteenth century light, a few whom these superior persons call "fossils": that is to say, there are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ who consider that the true gospel is no new gospel, but is the same yesterday, today, and for ever.

These do not believe in "advanced views," but judge that the view of truth which saved a soul in the second century will save a soul now, and that a form of teaching which was unknown till the last few years is of very dubious value, and is, in all probability, "another gospel, which is not another." It is extremely difficult for these two parties to abide in union. The old fable of the collier who went home to dwell with the fuller is nothing to it. The fuller would by degrees know the habits of his coaly companion, and might thus save the white linen from his touch; but in this case there are no fixed quantities on the collier's side, and nothing like permanency even in the black of his coal.

How can his friend deal with him, since he changes with the moon? If, after long balancing of words, the two parties could construct a basis of agreement, it would, in the nature of things, last only for a season, since the position of the advancing party would put the whole settlement out of order in a few weeks. One could hardly invent a sliding-scale in theology, as Sir Robert Peel did in the corn duties. The adjustment of difficulties would be a task for ever beginning, and never coming to an end.

If we agree, after a sort, today, a new settlement will be needed tomorrow. If I am to stay where I am, and you are to go traveling on, it is certain that we cannot long lodge in the same room. Why should we attempt it? Nor is it merely doctrinal belief--there is an essential difference in spirit between the old believer and the man of new and advancing views. This is painfully perceived by the Christian man before very long. Even if he be fortunate enough to escape the sneers of the cultured, and the jests of the philosophical, he will find his deepest convictions questioned, and his brightest beliefs misrepresented by those who dub themselves "thoughtful men."

When a text from the Word has been peculiarly precious to his heart, he will hear its authenticity impugned, the translation disputed, or its gospel reference denied. He will not travel far on the dark continent of modern thought before he will find the efficacy of prayer debated, the operation of divine Providence questioned, and the special love of God denied. He will find himself to be a stranger in a strange land when he begins to speak of his experience, and of the ways of God to men.

In all probability, if he be faithful to his old faith, he will be an alien to his mother's children, and find that his soul is among lions. To what end, therefore, are these strainings after a hollow unity, when the spirit of

fellowship is altogether gone? The world is large enough, why not let us go our separate ways? Loud is the cry of our opponents for liberty; let them have it by all means. But let us have our liberty also. We are not bound to belong to this society, or to that.

There is a right of association which we do not forego, and this involves a right of disassociation, which we retain with equal tenacity. Those who are so exceedingly liberal, large-hearted, and broad might be so good as to allow us to forego the charms of their society without coming under the full violence of their wrath. At any rate, cost what it may, to separate ourselves from those who separate themselves from the truth of God is not alone our liberty, but our duty. I have raised my protest in the only complete way by coming forth, and I shall be content to abide alone until the day when the Lord shall judge the secrets of all hearts; but it will not seem to me a strange thing if others are found faithful, and if others judge that for them also there is no path but that which is painfully apart from the beaten track.

STAND FAST

FAILURE at a crucial moment may mar the entire outcome of a life. A man who has enjoyed special light is made bold to follow in the way of the Lord, and is anointed to guide others therein. He rises into a place of love and esteem among the godly, and this promotes his advancement among men. What then? The temptation comes to be careful of the position he has gained, and to do nothing to endanger it. The man, so lately a faithful man of God, compromises with worldlings, and to quiet his own conscience invents a theory by which such compromises are justified, and even commended. He receives the praises of "the judicious"; he has, in truth, gone over to the enemy. The whole force of his former life now tells upon the wrong side. If the Lord loves him well enough, he will be scourged back to his place; but if not, he will grow more and more perverse, till he becomes a ring-leader among the opposers of the gospel. To avoid such an end it becomes us ever to stand fast.

C.H.S.

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