

SECOND-HAND RELIGION

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"Jesus answered, Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" John 18:34 (RSV).

Strange and disquieting rumors had been circulated on the streets of Jerusalem for a week concerning Christ Jesus. It was reported that on the previous Sabbath some of His enthusiastic followers from Galilee had escorted Him into the city with cries of "Hosanna to the son of David: blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord." Knowing the tempestuous temperament of the people under his jurisdiction, Pilate was naturally disturbed. And yet he did not think that Rome had much to fear from a carpenter's apprentice, with only a few peasants as his followers.

It was a dramatic moment when Pilate and Jesus Christ stood face to face in the governor's judgment hall. With mingled awe and amazement he asked the Lord Jesus this question, "Art thou the King of the Jews?" His question reflected the conviction of a small group of disciples, as well as a current rumor, and Pilate half believed that He was. In reply Jesus asked the governor the daring and searching question: "Sayest thou this thing of thyself, or did others tell it thee of me?" It was as if He had said: "Pilate, are you speaking from hearsay or out of your own experience? Am I your king?" "Did the question come out of your soul, or just out of your mouth? Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about Me? Have you caught up the phrase, 'King of the Jews,' from the man in the street, or are you really wondering who may be the rightful occupant of a throne of which you know yourself to be a mere usurper? Are you prepared to form real convictions, and to act on them at any cost?" What a searching answer Christ gave to Pilate's question, as well as to so much that passes for religion today!

It is evident that the Lord Jesus saw some fine possibilities in Pilate. He knew that he was yet capable of a high choice. Therefore, He held open the door of His kingdom to him and invited him to change hearsay into experience. Christ certainly had a right to know whether the judge was expressing his own opinion or one which he had picked up from somebody else. For when it comes to making up your mind, expressing your opinion, and giving voice to your convictions with respect to Jesus Christ, it makes all the difference in the world whether or not you are giving voice to convictions which are distinctly your own, born of personal knowledge of Him, or merely expressing the opinions of others.

Is your religion a matter of hearsay or of experience? If it is only hearsay, then you have missed the highest and the best. Let us be grateful for the hearsay that comes to us out of the Scriptures. It warms our hearts and gives us encouragement and hope when we read therein the statement of the Psalmist: "I sought the Lord, and he heard me, and delivered me from all my fears." Priceless also is the testimony of the saint throughout the centuries. We owe them a great and an unpayable debt. Our lives have been enriched greatly by the testimonies of many of them whom we have known personally. I have been strengthened, gladdened, and encouraged by the faithful testimony of various Christians. When rightly used hearsay can lead to great enrichment. Yet hearsay is not enough. To achieve its purpose it must be changed into experience.

Let us leave Pilate now, for this question, "Sayest thou this thing of thyself, or did others tell it thee of me?", is asked of each of us today, and we must face it. Take that hymn which we sing frequently, "Jesus, Lover of my soul." Christ wants to know about that. "Lover of my soul" -- "Sayest thou this of thy self, or did Charles Wesley tell it thee of me?" Are the words about Christ in our hymns and prayers our own words, beaten out in the fires of our experience, coming out in eager and real meaning, with the zest of a personal discovery behind them, or are we just repeating what has been told us by others? Is our religion founded on mere hearsay, other men's thoughts about the Saviour put in cold storage and preserved, and then handed out to us, or on Christ to whom we have spoken heart to heart? Is it a second-hand religion or a first-hand religion?

The trouble with many of us who want to be known as Christians is that we are living at second-hand. We are perpetuation forms and customs that we have inherited, forms and customs that meant something to others because for them they were the garments of rich experience. We frequently repeat words that those whose hearts were strangely warmed formulated in an attempt to express the ineffable. We sing hymns that men and women who knew Christ in intimate friendship struck extremely warm from their experience.

Why are so many of our generation taking religion second-hand? How do you account for the fact that we are living on leftovers that are so inadequate? Some have a second-hand religion and are living on leftovers because they have the wrong conception of the essential nature of the Christian religion. Many seem to think of it as a set of rules to which they must conform, and that they can accept it or reject it as they would a life insurance policy that a salesman tries to persuade them that they need. A second-hand religion is attractive to some people because it is easier than a first-hand experience. It is easier and more comfortable to deal with Christ by proxy than it is to face Him alone by yourself. Many have a second-hand religion and live on leftovers because that is the easiest and most convenient way of having a religion. Many professing Christians are content to go on living on leftovers, going through the motions, taking religion second-hand, because it is far easier than to have a religion of their own. For one's religion to be a first-hand experience is costly. Being a genuine Christian, after the Lord has forgiven your sins and saved your soul, involves regular habits of Bible study, meditation, and prayer. It demands that we try out Christ's way of life in our daily relationships. Christ said: "Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you."

Some professing Christians are living on leftovers because they doubt that they are capable of first-hand religious experiences. There are people in many congregations who stand for that which is finest and best in life. They are identified with the church because they believe in the things for which the church stands. They support the work of the church with their finances, and attend the worship services when it is convenient to do so. They do not deny the truths in God's Word, nor do they doubt the sincerity of many of their acquaintances who make claims of having had a first-hand religious experience. But they do not believe themselves capable of having first-hand religious experiences.

Faith in the living God must be personal. Faith can be and must be handed on from one generation to another, but it can never be a hand-me-down. It can never become

second-hand. It has to be first-hand. When it comes to faith in Christ, each generation must claim that faith again for itself. It is not enough to sing the old hymn, "Faith of our Fathers, Living Still," and to let it go at that. It was not enough that your mother was a good Christian, or that your father made liberal contributions to the Lord's work. If you try to live on the faith of your mother or on the good character of your father, you do not have anything to go on. A second-hand religion is not any good.

A young man told about a family in his church who attended Sunday School, worship services, and prayer meeting every week. Then suddenly they stopped coming. The pastor went to see them and asked, "Why?" They explained that when mother was alive, every Sunday morning everyone had to be out of bed, everyone had to get ready, everybody had to go to Sunday School and church. Mother expected it, and all went. Then mother died and as far as this family was concerned her faith died with her. It wasn't their faith but her faith which brought them to church. They were just going through the motions. All their religion was second-hand, and it was not worth anything at all.

When there is doubt, disappointment, despondency or despair, when there is sickness or pain, when one has to face death, second-hand religion always breaks down. All too easily it blames God when things go wrong. It cannot afford to take a good hard look at itself.

There are different reasons why a genuinely sincere soul can never be satisfied with a second-hand religion.

1. There is always something unreal about such a religion.

A person with a second-hand religion is repeating the words of another, and they do not ring true. Voltaire, the avowed infidel, was one day walking in Paris with a friend, when a religious procession passed them, carrying a crucifix, and Voltaire lifted his hat. "What?" said his friend, amazed. "Have you, too, found God?" "Ah," said Voltaire sadly and a little bitterly, "we salute, but we do not speak." Is not a lot of present-day religion of that kind -- men saluting the cross but not acknowledging Christ and having the proper relationship with Him? That is one reason why no sincere soul can be satisfied with a second-hand religion -- it is unreal.

2. There is always something insecure about such a religion.

If it is not your own, it is always at the mercy of doubts. It is always liable to go to pieces on the hard facts of life. John Wesley had always thought he was a Christian until one day his ship was caught in a storm in the Atlantic and fear got hold of him. The only people aboard, he noticed, who weren't terror-stricken were a little group of Moravian missionaries. And when the storm abated, "Were you not afraid?" Wesley asked one of them. "Afraid?" said the Moravian. "Why should I be afraid? I know Christ!" And then looking at Wesley with disconcerting frankness, "Do you know Christ?" he asked. And at that Wesley for the first time in his life realized that he did not. When it comes to the day of trouble, a second-hand religion is always insecure.

3. There is always something incomplete about such a religion.

It always gives you the sense of something lacking. You think of those who obviously have lived by the power of a vital experience of God in Christ -- how different they are, how radiant and sure, how unselfish and self-controlled! Why cannot we all learn their secret? Thomas Hardy one winter evening was walking in the fields, and the world was bleak and grey and shivery and dismal, everything, his own heart included, wrapped in gloom; when suddenly from a tree above his head a thrush burst into song, a veritable carol of joy -- and the poet stood still wondering.

"I could not think there trembled through
His happy good-night air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
And I was unaware."

Is not that how those who have really seen and known Christ strike you, that they have discovered something which you have not"

"Some blessed Hope, whereof they know
And we are unaware"?

The Psalmist said, "O God, Thou art my God!" What would you not give for a first-hand religion like that?

Only a personal experience can satisfy the human soul. It is well to know about God. Theology is the queen of all sciences. Yet no knowledge about God can take the place of knowing God Himself. However much I may know about water, my tongue will become swollen, my lips parched, and my body tortured to the point of death unless I actually drink water. It is fine to know about flowers. Botany is a lovely study. But no knowledge of botany can take the place of the perfume of the honeysuckles, nor the aroma of roses. Even so, no knowledge about God can take the place of knowing God through Christ.

It is only those who change hearsay into experience who have an adequate desire for the sharing of their experiences with others. To know any worth-while fact is to be possessed by an eagerness to share our knowledge. It is easy to keep silent about a religion of hearsay, but you can no more silence a religion of experience than you can dam up Niagara Falls.

You recall how the Samaritan woman ran to Sychar calling to the townspeople: "Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?" (John 4:29). "Then they went out of the city, and came unto him." When they returned, they said to the woman something that our generation desperately needs to be able to say: "Now we believe, not because of thy saying: for we have heard him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world" (John 4:42).

The final test of any faith is whether its adherents are willing to witness to that faith. Are they willing to tell others of the goodness of God to them? Are they willing and ready to talk about Christ, and what He means to them? Do they have anything at all to say about their faith?

In a court of law, a witness must give first-hand testimony about what he has seen, what

he has heard, what he has experienced. Hearsay evidence is out. Here a man is on the spot: he has to give first-hand testimony or he will be dismissed from the stand. He has to be able to say: "This is what I saw -- this is what I heard -- this is what happened to me." Any other kind of testimony is useless, and is not permitted if a capable judge is presiding.

Second-hand religion never stands the test of personal testimony. It never has anything to say, because it has never seen anything, never heard anything, and never experienced anything worth telling. Real faith in Christ always causes one to witness for Him to others.

You, who as yet have not been saved, are invited to believe on Christ as your personal Saviour. A second-hand faith will not be of any benefit to you. It must be first-hand and personal. It is through a personal faith in Christ that you can be saved. Won't you believe on Him now?