**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**1 CORINTHIANS-011**. **FORMS VERSUS CHARACTER by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God."*

*1 Corinthians 7:19*

*"For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love."*

*Galatians 5:6*

*"For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature."*

*Galatians 6:16 (R.V.)*

The great controversy which embittered so much of Paul's life, and marred so much of his activity, turned upon the question whether a heathen man could come into the Church simply by the door of faith, or whether he must also go through the gate of circumcision. We all know how Paul answered the question. Time, which settles all controversies, has settled that one so thoroughly that it is impossible to revive any kind of interest in it; and it may seem to be a pure waste of time to talk about it. But the principles that fought then are eternal, though the forms in which they manifest themselves vary with every varying age.

The Ritualist--using that word in its broadest sense--on the one hand, and the Puritan on the other, represent permanent tendencies of human nature; and we find to-day the old foes with new faces. These three passages, which I have read, are Paul's deliverance on the question of the comparative value of external rites and spiritual character. They are remarkable both for the identity in the former part of each and for the variety in the latter. In all the three cases he affirms, almost in the same language, that circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, that the Ritualist's rite and the Puritan's protest are equally insignificant in comparison with higher things. And then he varies the statement of what the higher things are, in a very remarkable and instructive fashion. The keeping of the commandments of God, says one of the texts, is the all-important matter. Then, as it were, he pierces deeper, and in another of the texts (I take the liberty of varying their order) pronounces that a new creature is the all-important thing. And then he pierces still deeper to the bottom of all, in the third text, and says the all-important thing is faith which worketh by love.

I think I shall best bring out the force of these words by dealing first with that emphatic threefold proclamation of the nullity of all externalism; and then with the singular variations in the triple statement of what is essential, viz. spiritual conduct and character.

**I. First, the emphatic proclamation of the nullity of outward rites.**

Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, say two texts. Circumcision availeth nothing, and uncircumcision availeth nothing, says the other. It neither is anything nor does anything. Did Paul say that because circumcision was a Jewish rite? No. As I believe, he said it because it was a rite; and because he had learned that the one thing needful was spiritual character, and that no external ceremonial of any sort could produce that. I think we are perfectly warranted in taking this principle of my text, and in extending it beyond the limits of the Jewish rite about which Paul was speaking. For if you remember, he speaks about baptism, in the first chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians, in a precisely similar tone and for precisely the same reason, when he says, in effect, I baptized Crispus and Gaius and the household of Stephanas, and I think these are all. I am not quite sure. I do not keep any kind of record of such things; God did not send me to baptize, He sent me to preach the Gospel.

The thing that produced the spiritual result was not the rite, but the truth, and therefore he felt that his function was to preach the truth and leave the rite to be administered by others. Therefore we can extend the principle here to all externalisms of worship, in all forms, in all churches, and say that in comparison with the essentials of an inward Christianity they are nothing and they do nothing.

They have their value. As long as we are here on earth, living in the flesh, we must have outward forms and symbolical rites. It is in Heaven that the seer saw no temple. Our sense-bound nature requires, and thankfully avails itself of, the help of external rites and ceremonials to lift us up towards the Object of our devotion. A man prays all the better if he bow his head, shut his eyes, and bend his knees. Forms do help us to the realisation of the realities, and the truths which they express and embody. Music may waft our souls to the heavens, and pictures may stir deep thoughts. That is the simple principle on which the value of all external aids to devotion depends. They may be helps towards the appreciation of divine truth, and to the suffusing of the heart with devout emotions which may lead to building up a holy character.

There is a worth, therefore--an auxiliary and subordinate worth--in these things, and in that respect they are not nothing, nor do they avail nothing. But then all external rites tend to usurp more than belongs to them, and in our weakness we are apt to cleave to them, and instead of using them as means to lift us higher, to stay in them, and as a great many of us do, to mistake the mere gratification of taste and the excitement of the sensibilities for worship. A bit of stained glass may be glowing with angel-forms and pictured saints, but it always keeps some of the light out, and it always hinders us from seeing through it. And all external worship and form have so strong a tendency to usurp more than belongs to them, and to drag us down to their own level, even whilst we think that we are praying, that I believe the wisest man will try to pare down the externals of his worship to the lowest possible point. If there be as much body as will keep a soul in, as much form as will embody the spirit, that is all that we want. What is more is dangerous.

All form in worship is like fire, it is a good servant but it is a bad master, and it needs to be kept very rigidly in subordination, or else the spirituality of Christian worship vanishes before men know; and they are left with their dead forms which are only evils--crutches that make people limp by the very act of using them.

Now, my dear friends, when that has happened, when men begin to say, as the people in Paul's time were saying about circumcision, and as people are saying in this day about Christian rites, that they are necessary, then it is needful to take up Paul's ground and to say, No! they are nothing! They are useful in a certain place, but if you make them obligatory, if you make them essential, if you say that grace is miraculously conveyed through them, then it is needful that we should raise a strong note of protestation, and declare their absolute nullity for the highest purpose, that of making that spiritual character which alone is essential.

And I believe that this strange recrudescence--to use a modern word--of ceremonialism and aesthetic worship which we see all round about us, not only in the ranks of the Episcopal Church, but amongst Nonconformists, who are sighing for a less bare service, and here and there are turning their chapels into concert-rooms, and instead of preaching the Gospel are having Services of Song and the like--that all this makes it as needful to-day as ever it was to say to men: Forms are not worship. Rites may crush the spirit. Men may yield to the sensuous impressions which they produce, and be lapped in an atmosphere of aesthetic emotion, without any real devotion.

Such externals are only worth anything if they make us grasp more firmly with our understandings and feel more profoundly with our hearts, the great truths of the Gospel. If they do that, they help; if they are not doing that, they hinder, and are to be fought against. And so we have again to proclaim to-day, as Paul did, Circumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God.

Then notice with what remarkable fairness and boldness and breadth the Apostle here adds that other clause: and uncircumcision is nothing. It is a very hard thing for a man whose life has been spent in fighting against an error, not to exaggerate the value of his protest. It is a very hard thing for a man who has been delivered from the dependence upon forms, not to fancy that his formlessness is what the other people think that their forms are. The Puritan who does not believe that a man can be a good man because he is a Ritualist or a Roman Catholic, is committing the very same error as the Ritualist or the Roman Catholic who does not believe that the Puritan can be a Christian unless he has been christened. The two people are exactly the same, only the one has hold of the stick at one end, and the other at the other. There may be as much idolatry in superstitious reliance upon the bare worship as in the advocacy of the ornate; and many a Nonconformist who fancies that he has never bowed the knee to Baal is as true an idol-worshipper in his superstitious abhorrence of the ritualism that he sees in other communities, as are the men who trust in it the most.

It is a large attainment in Christian character to be able to say with Paul, Circumcision is nothing, and my own favourite point of uncircumcision is nothing either. Neither the one side nor the other touches the essentials.

**II. Now let us look at the threefold variety of the designation of these essentials here.**

In our first text from the Epistle to the Corinthians we read, Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God. If we finished the sentence it would be, but the keeping of the commandments of God is everything.

And by that keeping the commandments, of course, the Apostle does not mean merely external obedience. He means something far deeper than that, which I put into this plain word, that the one essential of a Christian life is the conformity of the will with God's--not the external obedience merely, but the entire surrender and the submission of my will to the will of my Father in Heaven. That is the all-important thing; that is what God wants; that is the end of all rites and ceremonies; that is the end of all revelation and of all utterances of the divine heart. The Bible, Christ's mission, His passion and death, the gift of His Divine Spirit, and every part of the divine dealings in providence, all converge upon this one aim and goal. For this purpose the Father worketh hitherto, and Christ works, that man's will may yield and bow itself wholly and happily and lovingly to the great infinite will of the Father in heaven.

Brethren! that is the perfection of a man's nature, when his will fits on to God's like one of Euclid's triangles superimposed upon another, and line for line coincides. When his will allows a free passage to the will of God, without resistance or deflection, as light travels through transparent glass; when his will responds to the touch of God's finger upon the keys, like the telegraphic needle to the operator's hand, then man has attained all that God and religion can do for him, all that his nature is capable of; and far beneath his feet may be the ladders of ceremonies and forms and outward acts, by which he climbed to that serene and blessed height, Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of God's commandments is everything.

That submission of will is the sum and the test of your Christianity. Your Christianity does not consist only in a mere something which you call faith in Jesus Christ. It does not consist in emotions, however deep and blessed and genuine they may be. It does not consist in the acceptance of a creed. All these are means to an end. They are meant to drive the wheel of life, to build up character, to make your deepest wish to be, Father! not my will, but Thine, be done. In the measure in which that is your heart's desire, and not one hair's-breadth further, have you a right to call yourself a Christian.

But, then, I can fancy a man saying: It is all very well to talk about bowing the will in this fashion; how can I do that? Well, let us take our second text--the third in the order of their occurrence--For neither circumcision is anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature. That is to say, if we are ever to keep the will of God we must be made over again. Ay! we must! Our own consciences tell us that; the history of all the efforts that ever we have made--and I suppose all of us have made some now and then, more or less earnest and more or less persistent--tells us that there needs to be a stronger hand than ours to come into the fight if it is ever to be won by us. There is nothing more heartless and more impotent than to preach, Bow your wills to God, and then you will be happy; bow your wills to God, and then you will be good. If that is all the preacher has to say, his powerless words will but provoke the answer, We cannot. Tell the leopard to change his spots, or the Ethiopian his skin, as soon as tell a man to reduce this revolted kingdom within him to obedience, and to bow his will to the will of God. We cannot do it. But, brethren, in that word, a new creature, lies a promise from God; for a creature implies a creator. It is He that hath made us, and not we ourselves. The very heart of what Christ has to offer us is the gift of His own life to dwell in our hearts, and by its mighty energy to make us free from the law of sin and death which binds our wills. We may have our spirits moulded into His likeness, and new tastes, and new desires, and new capacities infused into us, so as that we shall not be left with our own poor powers to try and force ourselves into obedience to God's will, but that submission and holiness and love that keeps the commandments of God, will spring up in our renewed spirits as their natural product and growth. Oh! you men and women who have been honestly trying, half your lifetime, to make yourselves what you know God wants you to be, and who are obliged to confess that you have failed, hearken to the message: If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature, old things are passed away. The one thing needful is keeping the commandments of God, and the only way by which we can keep the commandments of God is that we should be formed again into the likeness of Him of whom alone it is true that He did always the things that pleased God.

And so we come to the last of these great texts: In Christ Jesus, neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love. That is to say, if we are to be made over again, we must have faith in Christ Jesus. We have got to the root now, so far as we are concerned. We must keep the commandments of God; if we are to keep the commandments we must be made over again, and if our hearts ask how can we receive that new creating power into our lives, the answer is, by faith which worketh by love.

Paul did not believe that external rites could make men partakers of a new nature, but he believed that if a man would trust in Jesus Christ, the life of that Christ would flow into his opened heart, and a new spirit and nature would be born in him. And, therefore, his triple requirements come all down to this one, so far as we are concerned, as the beginning and the condition of the other two. Neither circumcision does anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love, does everything. He that trusts Christ opens his heart to Christ, who comes with His new-creating Spirit, and makes us willing in the day of His power to keep His commandments.

But faith leads us to obedience in yet another fashion, than this opening of the door of the heart for the entrance of the new-creating Spirit. It leads to it in the manner which is expressed by the words of our text, worketh by love. Faith shows itself living, because it leads us to love, and through love it produces its effects upon conduct.

Two things are implied in this designation of faith. If you trust Christ you will love Him. That is plain enough. And you will not love Him unless you trust Him. Though it lies wide of my present purpose, let us take this lesson in passing. You cannot work yourself up into a spasm or paroxysm of religious emotion and love by resolution or by effort. All that you can do is to go and look at the Master and get near Him, and that will warm you up. You can love if you trust. Your trust will make you love; unless you trust you will never love Him.

The second thing implied is, that if you love you will obey. That is plain enough. The keeping of the commandments will be easy where there is love in the heart. The will will bow where there is love in the heart. Love is the only fire that is hot enough to melt the iron obstinacy of a creature's will. The will cannot be driven. Strike it with violence and it stiffens; touch it gently and it yields. If you try to put an iron collar upon the will, like the demoniac in the Gospels, the touch of the apparent restraint drives it into fury, and it breaks the bands asunder. Fasten it with the silken leash of love, and a little child can lead it. So faith works by love, because whom we trust we shall love, and whom we love we shall obey.

Therefore we have got to the root now, and nothing is needful but an operative faith, out of which will come all the blessed possession of a transforming Spirit, and all sublimities and noblenesses of an obedient and submissive will.

My brother! Paul and James shake hands here. There is a faith so called, which does not work. It is dead! Let me beseech you, none of you to rely upon what you choose to call your faith in Jesus Christ, but examine it. Does it do anything? Does it help you to be like Him? Does it open your hearts for His Spirit to come in? Does it fill them with love to that Master, a love which proves itself by obedience? Plain questions, questions that any man can answer; questions that go to the root of the whole matter. If your faith does that, it is genuine; if it does not, it is not.

And do not trust either to forms, or to your freedom from forms. They will not save your souls, they will not make you more Christ-like. They will not help you to pardon, purity, holiness, blessedness. In these respects neither if we have them are we the better, nor if we have them not are we the worse. If you are trusting to Christ, and by that faith are having your hearts moulded and made over again into all holy obedience, then you have all that you need. Unless you have, though you partook of all Christian rites, though you believed all Christian truth, though you fought against superstitious reliance on forms, you have not the one thing needful, for in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love.