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

**NEHEMIAH-005. AN ANCIENT NONCONFORMIST by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"... So did not I, because of the fear of God."*

*Nehemiah 5:15*

I do not suppose that the ordinary Bible-reader knows very much about Nehemiah. He is one of the neglected great men of Scripture. He was no prophet, he had no glowing words, he had no lofty visions, he had no special commission, he did not live in the heroic age. There was a certain harshness and dryness; a tendency towards what, when it was more fully developed, became Pharisaism, in the man, which somewhat covers the essential nobleness of his character. But he was brave, cautious, circumspect, disinterested; and he had Jerusalem in his heart.

The words that I have read are a little fragment of his autobiography which deal with a prosaic enough matter, but carry in them large principles. When he was appointed governor of the little colony of returned exiles in Palestine, he found that his predecessors, like Turkish pashas and Chinese mandarins to-day, had been in the habit of squeezing the people of their Government, and that they had requisitioned sufficient supplies of provisions to keep the governor's table well spread. It was the custom. Nobody would have wondered if Nehemiah had conformed to it; but he felt that he must have his hands clean. Why did he not do what everybody else had done in like circumstances? His answer is beautifully simple: Because of the fear of God. His religion went down into the little duties of common life, and imposed upon him a standard far above the maxims that were prevalent round about him. And so, if you will take these words, and disengage them from the small matter concerning which they were originally spoken, I think you will find in them thoughts as to the attitude which we should take to prevalent practices, the motive which should impel us to a sturdy non-compliance, and the power which will enable us to walk on a solitary road. So did not I, because of the fear of God. Now, then, these are my three points:--

**I. The attitude to prevalent practices.**

Nehemiah would not conform. And unless you can say No! and do it very often, your life will be shattered from the beginning. That non-compliance with customary maxims and practices is the beginning, or, at least, one of the foundation-stones, of all nobleness and strength, of all blessedness and power. Of course it is utterly impossible for a man to denude himself of the influences that are brought to bear upon him by the circumstances in which he lives, and the trend of opinion, and the maxims and practices of the world, in the corner, and at the time, in which his lot is cast. But, on the other hand, be sure of this, that unless you are in a very deep and not at all a technical sense of the word, Nonconformists, you will come to no good. None! It is so easy to do as others do, partly because of laziness, partly because of cowardice, partly because of the instinctive imitation which is in us all. Men are gregarious. One great teacher has drawn an illustration from a flock of sheep, and says that if we hold up a stick, and the first of the flock jumps over it, and then if we take away the stick, all the rest of the flock will jump when they come to the point where the first did so. A great many of us adopt our creeds and opinions, and shape our lives for no better reason than because people round us are thinking in a certain direction, and living in a certain way. It saves a great deal of trouble, and it gratifies a certain strange instinct that is in us all, and it avoids dangers and conflicts that we should, when we are at Rome, do as the Romans do. So did not I, because of the fear of God.

Now, brethren! I ask you to take this plain principle of the necessity of non-compliance (which I suppose I do not need to do much to establish, because, theoretically, we most of us admit it), and apply it all round the circumference of your lives. Apply it to your opinions. There is no tyranny like the tyranny of a majority in a democratic country like ours. It is quite as harsh as the tyranny of the old-fashioned despots. Unless you resolve steadfastly to see with your own eyes, to use your own brains, to stand on your own feet, to be a voice and not an echo, you will be helplessly enslaved by the fashion of the hour, and the opinions that prevail.

What everybody says--perhaps--is true. What most people say, at any given time, is very likely to be false. Truth has always lived with minorities, so do not let the current of widespread opinion sweep you away, but try to have a mind of your own, and not to be brow-beaten or overborne because the majority of the people round about you are giving utterance, and it may be unmeasured utterance, to any opinions.

Now, there is one direction in which I wish to urge that especially--and now I speak mainly to the young men in my congregation--and that is, in regard to the attitude that so many amongst us are taking to Christian truth. If you have honestly thought out the subject to the best of your ability, and have come to conclusions diverse from those which men like me hold dearer than their lives, that is another matter. But I know that very widely there is spread to-day the fashion of unbelief. So many influential men, leaders of opinion, teachers and preachers, are giving up the old-fashioned Evangelical faith, that it takes a strong man to say that he sticks by it. It is a poor reason to give for your attitude, that unbelief is in the air, and nobody believes those old doctrines now. That may be. There are currents of opinion that are transitory, and that is one of them, depend upon it. But at all events do not be fooled out of your faith, as some of you are tending to be, for no better reason than because other people have given it up. An iceberg lowers the temperature all round it, and the iceberg of unbelief is amongst us to-day, and it has chilled a great many people who could not tell why they have lost the fervour of their faith.

On the other hand, let me remind you that a mere traditional religion, which is only orthodox because other people are so, and has not verified its beliefs by personal experience, is quite as deleterious as an imitative unbelief. Doubtless, I speak to some who plume themselves on never having been affected by these currents of popular opinion, but whose unblemished and unquestioned orthodoxy has no more vitality in it than the other people's heterodoxy. The one man has said, What is everywhere always, and by all believed, I believe; and the other man has said, What the select spirits of this day disbelieve, I disbelieve, and the belief of one and the unbelief of the other are equally worthless, and really identical.

But it is not only, nor mainly, in reference to opinion that I would urge upon you this nonconformity with prevalent practices as the measure of most that is noble in us. I dare not talk to you as if I knew much about the details of Manchester commercial life, but I can say this much, that it is no excuse for shady practices in your trade to say, It is the custom of the trade, and everybody does it. Nehemiah might have said: There never was a governor yet but took his forty shekels a day's worth--about £1,800 of our money--of provisions from these poor people, and I am not going to give it up because of a scruple. It is the custom, and because it is the custom I can do it. I am not going into details. It is commonly understood that preachers know nothing about business; that may be true, or it may not. But this, I am sure, is a word in season for some of my friends this evening--do not hide behind the trade. Come out into the open, and deal with the questions of morality involved in your commercial life, as you will have to deal with them hereafter, by yourself. Never mind about other people. Oh, but you say, that involves loss. Very likely! Nehemiah was a poorer man because he fed all these one hundred and fifty Jews at his table, but he did not mind that. It may involve loss, but you will keep God, and that is gain.

Turn this searchlight in another direction. I see a number of young people in my congregation at this moment, young men who are perhaps just beginning their career in this city, and who possibly have been startled when they heard the kind of talk that was going on at the next desk, or from the man that sits beside them on the benches at College. Do not be tempted to follow that multitude to do evil. Unless you are prepared to say No! to a great deal that will be pushed into your face in this great city, as sure as you are living you will make shipwreck of your lives. Do you think that in the forty years and more that I have stood here I have not seen successive generations of young men come into Manchester? I could people many of these pews with the faces of such, who came here buoyant, full of hope, full of high resolves, and with a mother's benediction hanging over their heads, and who got into a bad set, and had not the strength to say No, and they went down and down and down, and then presently somebody asked, Where is so-and-so? Oh! his health broke down, and he has gone home to die. His bones are full of the iniquity of his youth--and he made shipwreck of prospects and of life, because he did not pull himself together when the temptation came, and say, So did not I, because of the fear of God.

**II. Now let me ask you to turn with me to the second thought that my text suggests to me; that is, The motive that impels to this sturdy non-compliance.**

Nehemiah puts it in Old Testament phraseology, the fear of God; the New Testament equivalent is the love of Christ. And if you want to take the power and the life out of both phrases, in order to find a modern conventional equivalent, you will say religion. I prefer the old-fashioned language. The love of Christ impels to this non-compliance. Now, my point is this, that Jesus Christ requires from each of us that we shall abstain, restrict ourselves, refuse to do a great many things that are being done round us.

I need not remind you of how continually He spoke about taking up the cross. I need not do more than just remind you of His parable of the two ways, but ask you, whilst you think of it, to note that all the characteristics of each of the ways which He sets forth are given by Him as reasons for refusing the one and walking in the other. For example, Enter ye in at the strait gate, for strait is the gate--that is a reason for going in; and narrow is the way--that is a reason for going in; and few there be that find it--that is a reason for going in. Wide is the gate--that is a reason for stopping out; and broad is the way--that is a reason for stopping out; and many there be that go in thereat--that is a reason for stopping out. Is not that what I said, that the minority is generally right and the majority wrong? Just because there are so many people on the path, suspect it, and expect that the path with fewer travellers is probably the better and the higher.

But to pass from that, what did Jesus Christ mean by His continual contrast between His disciples and the world? What did He mean by the world? This fair universe, with all its possibilities of help and blessing, and all its educational influences? By no means. He meant by the world the aggregate of things and men considered as separate from God. And when He applied the term to men only, He meant by it very much what we mean when we talk about society. Society is not organised on Christian principles; we all know that, and until it is, if a man is going to be a Christian he must not conform to the world. Know ye not that whosoever is a friend of the world is an enemy of God.

I would press upon you, dear friends! that our Christianity is nothing unless it leads us to a standard, and a course of conduct in conformity with that standard, which will be in diametrical opposition to a great deal of what is patted on the back, and petted and praised by society. Now, there is an easy-going kind of Christianity which does not recognise that, and which is in great favour with many people to-day, and is called liberality and breadth, and conciliating and commending Christianity to outsiders, and I know not what besides. Well, Christ's words seem to me to come down like a hammer upon that sort of thing. Depend upon it, the world--I mean by that the aggregate of godless men organised as they are in society--does not think much of these trimmers. It may dislike an out-and-out Christian, but it knows him when it sees him, and it has a kind of hostile respect for him which the other people will never get. You remember the story of the man that was seeking for a coachman, and whose question to each applicant was, How near can you drive to the edge of a precipice? He took the man who said: I would keep away from it as far as I could. And the so-called Christian people that seem to be bent on showing how much their lives can be made to assimilate to the lives of men that have no sympathy with their creeds, are like the rash Jehus that tried to go as near the edge as they could. But the consistent Christian will keep as far away from it as he can. There are some of us who seem as if we were most anxious to show that we, whose creed is absolutely inconsistent with the world's practices, can live lives which are all but identical with these practices. Jesus Christ says, through the lips of His Apostle, what He often said in other language by His own lips when He was here on earth: Be ye not conformed to the world.

Surely such a command as that, just because it involves difficulty, self-restraint, self-denial, and sometimes self-crucifixion, ought to appeal, and does appeal, to all that is noble in humanity, in a fashion that that smooth, easy-going gospel of living on the level of the people round us never can do. For remember that Christ's commandment not to be conformed to the world is the consequence of His commandment to be conformed to Himself. Thus did not I comes second; This one thing I do comes first. You will misunderstand the whole genius of the Gospel if you suppose that, as a law of life, it is perpetually pulling men short up, and saying: Don't, don't, don't! There is a Christianity of that sort which is mainly prohibition and restriction, but it is not Christ's Christianity. He begins by enjoining: This do in remembrance of Me, and the man that has accepted that commandment must necessarily say, as he looks out on the world, and its practices: So did not I, because of the fear of God.

**III. And now one last word--my text not only suggests the motive which impels to this non-compliance, but also the power which enables us to exercise it.**

The fear of God, or, taking the New Testament equivalent, the love of Christ, makes it possible for a man, with all his weakness and dependence on surroundings, with all his instinctive desire to be like the folk that are near him, to take that brave attitude, and to refuse to be one of the crowd that runs after evil and lies. I have no time to dwell upon this aspect of my subject, as I should be glad to have done. Let me sum up in a sentence or two what I would have said. Christ will enable you to take this necessary attitude because, in Himself He gives you the Example which it is always safe to follow. The instinct of imitation is planted in us for a good end, and because it is in us, examples of nobility appeal to us. And because it is in us Jesus Christ has lived the life that it is possible for, and therefore incumbent on, us to live. It is safe to imitate Him, and it is easy not to do as men do, if once our main idea is to do as Christ did.

He makes it possible for us, because He gives the strongest possible motive for the life that He prescribes. As the Apostle puts it, Ye are bought with a price, be not the servants of men. There is nothing that will so deliver us from the tyranny of majorities, and of what we call general opinion and ordinary custom, as to feel that we belong to Him because He died for us. Men become very insignificant when Christ speaks, and the charter of our freedom from them lies in our redemption by the blood of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ being our Redeemer is our Judge, and moment by moment He is estimating our conduct, and judging our actions as they are done. With me it is a very small matter to be judged of you or of man's judgment. He that judgeth me is the Lord. Never mind what the people round you say; you do not take your orders from them, and you do not answer to them. Like some official abroad, appointed by the Crown, you do not report to the local authorities; you report to headquarters, and what He thinks about you is the only important thing. So the fear of man which bringeth a snare dwindles down into very minute dimensions when we think of the Pattern, the Redeemer and the Judge to whom we give account.

And so, dear friends! if we will only open our hearts, by quiet humble faith, for the coming of Jesus Christ into our lives, then we shall be able to resist, to refuse compliance, to stand firm, though alone. The servant of Christ is the master of all men. All things are yours, whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas--all are yours, and ye are Christ's.