

Men Of Good Will

By John Henry Newman.

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Now in order to show what this good will, or good disposition is, and how it bears upon faith, I observe as follows: What is the main guide of the soul, given to the whole race of Adam, outside the true fold of Christ as well as within it, given from the first dawn of reason, given to it in spite of that grievous penalty of ignorance, which is one of the chief miseries of our fallen state? It is the light of conscience, "the true Light," as the same Evangelist says, in the same passage, "which enlightens every man that comes into this world." (John 1:9) Whether a man be born in pagan darkness, or in some corruption of revealed religion, — whether he has heard the name of the Saviour of the world or not, — whether he be the slave of some superstition, or is in possession of some portions of Scripture, and treats the inspired word as a sort of philosophical book, which he interprets for himself, and comes to certain conclusions about its teaching, — in any case, he has within his breast a certain commanding dictate, not a mere sentiment, not a mere opinion, or impression, or view of things, but a law, an authoritative voice, bidding him do certain things and avoid others.

I do not say that its particular injunctions are always clear, or that they are always consistent with each other; but what I am insisting on here is this, that it commands, that it praises, it blames, it promises, it threatens, it implies a future, and it witnesses the unseen. It is more than a man's own self. The man himself has not power over it, or only with extreme difficulty; he did not make it, he cannot destroy it. He may silence it in particular cases or directions, he may distort its enunciations, but he cannot, or it is quite the exception if he can, he cannot emancipate himself from it. He can disobey it, he may refuse to use it; but it remains.

This is Conscience; and, from the nature of the case, its very existence carries on our minds to a Being exterior to ourselves; for else whence did it come? And to a Being superior to ourselves; else whence its strange, troublesome peremptoriness? I say, without going on to the question what it says, and whether its particular dictates are always as clear and consistent as they might be, its very existence throws us out of ourselves, and beyond ourselves, to go and seek for Him in the height and depth, whose Voice it is. As the sunshine implies that the sun is in the heavens, though we may see it not, as a knocking at our doors at night implies the presence of one outside in the dark who asks for admittance, so this Word within us, not only instructs us up to a certain point, but necessarily raises our minds to the idea of a Teacher, an unseen Teacher: and in proportion as we listen to that Word, and use it, not only do we learn more from it, not only do its dictates become clearer, and its lessons broader, and its principles more consistent, but its very tone is louder and more authoritative and constraining. And thus it is, that to those who use what they have, more is given; for, beginning with obedience, they go on to the intimate perception and belief of one God. His voice within them witnesses to Him, and they believe His own witness about Himself. They believe in His existence, not because others say it, not in the word of man merely, but with a personal apprehension of its truth. This, then, is the first step in those good dispositions, which lead to faith in the Gospel.

And my second remark is this: that, in spite of all that this Voice does for them, it does not do enough, as they most keenly and sorrowfully feel. They find it most difficult to separate what it really says, taken by itself, from what their own passion or pride, self-love or self-will, mingles with it. Many is the time when they cannot tell how much that true inward Guide commands, and how much comes from a mere earthly source. So that the gift of conscience raises a desire for what it does not itself fully supply. It inspires in them the idea of authoritative guidance, of a divine law; and the desire of possessing it in its fulness, not in mere fragmentary portions or indirect suggestion. It creates in them a thirst, an impatience, for the knowledge of that Unseen Lord, and Governor, and Judge, who as yet speaks to them only secretly, who whispers in their hearts, who tells them something, but not nearly so much as they wish and as they need. Thus, you see, my Brethren, a religious man, who has not the blessing of the infallible teaching of revelation, is led to look out for it, for the very reason that he is religious. He has something, but not all; and if he did not desire more, it would be a proof that he had not used, that he had not profited by, what he had. Hence, he will be on the look-out.

Such is the definition, I may say, of every religious man, who has not the knowledge of Christ; he is on the look-out. As the Jewish believers were on the look-out for the Messiah who they knew was to come, so at all times, and under all dispensations, and in all sects, there are those who know there is a truth, who know they do not possess it except in a very low measure, who desire to know more, who know that He alone who has taught them what they know, can teach them more, and so are on the look-out for His teaching.

There is another reason why they will be thus waiting and watching for some further knowledge of God's will than they at present possess. It is because the more a person tries to obey his conscience, the more he gets alarmed at himself, for obeying it so imperfectly. His sense of duty will become more keen, and his perception of transgression more delicate, and he will understand more and more how many things he has to be forgiven. But next, while he thus grows in self-knowledge, he also understands more and more clearly that the voice of conscience has nothing gentle, nothing of mercy in its tone. It is severe, and even stern. It does not speak of forgiveness, but of punishment. It suggests to him a future judgment; it does not tell him how he can avoid it. Moreover it does not tell him how he is to get better; he feels himself very sinful at the best; he feels himself in bondage to a tyranny which, alas! he loves too well, even while he hates it. And thus, he is in great anguish, and cries out in the Apostle's words, "Unhappy man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death!"

For all these reasons then, — because he feels his ignorance, because he feels his bondage, because he feels his guilt and danger, — a religious man who has not the blessing of revelation, will be on the look-out for revelation. And this is the second disposition leading to faith in Christ: the first was belief in God, as our Teacher, Governor, and Judge; and the second is the earnest desire that He would reveal Himself, and an eager looking-out for the chance of His doing so.

This is the state of mind of the elect few: now, on the other hand, let us consider the state of mind of the multitude, who care little or nothing for religion, who disobey their conscience, who think as little of its dictates as they can, who would get rid of it, if they could. What will they know of the convictions, the apprehensions, and the hopes and wishes, of which I have been speaking? Will they have any nervous anxiety, any painful longing to be brought out of their present darkness? Will they, being, as I am supposing, strangers to revealed truth, will they be on the look-out for revelation? What is revelation to them? What do they care how sins are to be forgiven, when they

do not feel the burden of sin? What desire have they for strength greater than their own to overcome their passions or their pride, seeing that they make much of their pride, as their true dignity, and freely indulge their passions, as their sole joy?

They are contented with themselves; they think themselves as happily conditioned as they can be under the circumstances; they only wish to be let alone; they have no need of priest or prophet; they live in their own way and in their own home, pursuing their own tastes, never looking out of doors; perhaps with natural virtues, perhaps not, but with no distinct or consistent religious sense. Thus, they live, and thus they die. Such is the character of the many, all over the earth; they live, to all appearance, in some object of this world, and never rise above the world, and, it is plain, have nothing of those dispositions at all which lead to faith.

Now take a man from each of these two classes, and suppose the news actually reaches them both, that a message has been received from the unseen world: how will they respectively act? It is plain: on him who has been looking out, or hoping, or at least longing, for such a mercy, its operation will be wonderful. It will affect him profoundly; it will thrill through him; so much so, that, provided only the message, on examination, be of a nature to answer his needs, he will be under a strong temptation to believe it, if he can, on very little evidence, or on none at all. At all events he will set about inquiring what its evidence is, and will do his best to find it all out, whether it be more or less. On the other hand, the man who is without the due religious dispositions I have been describing, simply is not moved at all. He takes no interest in the report, and will not go to the pains to inquire about it. He will sit at home; and it will not even occur to him that he ought to rise, and look about him. He is as little stirred, as if he heard that a great man had arisen in the antipodes, or that there was a revolution in Japan. Here then we have come to the critical difference between the two descriptions of men. The one is active, and the other passive, when Christ is preached as the Saviour of the world.

The one goes to meet the truth; the other thinks that the Truth ought to come to him. The one examines into the proof that God has spoken; the other waits till this is proved to him. He feels no personal interest in it; he thinks it not his own concern, but (if I may so say) God Almighty's concern. He does not care to make the most of his knowledge; he does not put things together; he does not add up his facts and cumulate his arguments; he leaves all this to be done for him by Him who speaks to him; and if he is to have any trouble in the matter, then he is willing to dismiss it altogether. And next, supposing proof is actually offered him, he feels no sort of gratitude or delicacy towards Him who offers it: he says without compunction, "I do not see this"; and "that does not follow"; for he is a critic and a judge, not an inquirer, and he negotiates and bargains, when he ought to be praying for light. And thus, he learns nothing rightly, and goes the way to reject a divine message, because he will not throw himself upon and into the evidence; while his neighbour, who has a real concern for his own salvation, finds it and believes.

Returning, then, to what I said when I began, we see now how it was that Our Lord praised easiness of belief, and condemned hardness of belief. To be easy in believing is nothing more or less than to have been ready to inquire; to be hard of belief is nothing else but to have been loath and reluctant to inquire. Those whose faith He praised had no stronger evidence than those whose unbelief He condemned; but they had used their eyes, used their reason, exerted their minds, and persevered in inquiry till they found; while the others, whose unbelief He condemned, had heard indeed but had let the divine seed lie by the roadside, or in the rocky soil, or among the thorns which choked it. And here I am led to say, what seems to me, as far as it is reverent to conjecture it, the fault of the

holy Apostle Saint Thomas. He said that he would not believe that Our Lord had risen, unless he actually saw Him. What! Is there not more than one way of arriving at faith in Christ? Are there not a hundred proofs, distinct from each other, and all good ones? Was there no way of being sure He came from God, except that of seeing the great miracle of the resurrection? Surely, there were many others; but Saint Thomas prescribed the only mode in which he would consent to believe in Him. This was the case of his countrymen also, for in this point he only did what they had done.

The Jews had long been the people of God, and they had the writings of the Prophets. The fulfilment of the prophecies in the Person of Our Lord was the most obvious and natural evidence to the Jews that He was the Messiah; but they would not accept this evidence, and determined to have another. They determined to be convinced in one particular way, namely, by miracles; and when, out of the superabundant mercy of God, miracles were wrought before their eyes, then, they would choose the special kind of miracle, which was to convince them, and would not believe, unless it was a miracle to their liking. And hence it was that Our Lord said, as I have already quoted His words: "Unless ye see signs and wonders, ye believe not." (John 4:48). Hence, too, He said, on other occasions: "O foolish and slow of heart to believe in all things which the Prophets have spoken." (Luke 24:25). And: "If they hear not Moses and the Prophets, neither will they believe if one rise again from the dead." (Luke 16:31). And: "An evil and adulterous generation seeks a sign, and a sign shall not be given it, but the sign of Jonah the Prophet." (Matthew 12:39). And hence, the Jews of Thessalonica are censured, and the Bereans, on the contrary, praised, "who received the word with all eagerness, daily searching the Scriptures, whether these things were so." It is added, "and many of them believed." (Acts 17:11-12).

And therefore, in the instance of Saint Thomas, I say that, when he was so slow to believe, his fault lay in thinking he had a right to be fastidious, and to pick and choose by what arguments he would be convinced, instead of asking himself whether he had not enough to convince him already; just as if, forsooth, it were a great matter to his Lord that he should believe, and no matter at all to himself. And therefore it was, that, while Christ so graciously granted him the kind of proof he desired, He said to him for our sakes: "Because you have seen Me, Thomas, you have believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and have believed." (John 20:29). And so, alas! it is now: many is the man who has a drawing towards the Catholic Church, and resists it, on the plea that he has not sufficient proof of her claims. Now he cannot have proof all at once, he cannot be converted all at once, I grant; but he can inquire; he can determine to resolve the doubt, before he puts it aside, though it cost labour and time to do so. The intimate feeling of his heart should be: "What must I do, that I may be saved?" His best consolation is the promise: "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you." If, instead of this, he quarrels with this or that particular proof, never thinks of inquiring for himself, and ascertaining where the truth lies, contents himself with admiring the Church, and so ends the matter, what is this but the conduct of one who has no sensitive conscience, who loves his own ease, or the comforts of life, or his worldly reputation, or the society of his relatives, or his worldly interests, and considers that religious truth is not worth the sacrifice of these temporal advantages?

Do not fancy, my Brethren, that what I have been saying about inquirers, in no sense applies to you. Catholics, indeed, have not to seek; the anxious questions which natural conscience asks, are in your case answered to the full. You know who saves you, and how; but recollect that that same sensitiveness and delicacy of conscience, which is the due disposition for faith, is also its safeguard and its nutriment, when it is at length possessed. It feeds the flame of faith, and makes it burn

brightly. Saint Paul speaks of those, who, having "rejected a good conscience," had "made shipwreck of their faith."

This will be particularly the case in a day like this. Catholics go into the world; they mix with men of all religions; they hear all manner of sophistical objections made to the Church, her doctrines, and her rules. What is practically to keep them steadfast in the faith, but their intimate perception of their need of it? What is to bring them to the sacrament of penance, but their sorrow and their detestation of sin? What is to bring them to communion, but a thirst for the Living and True God? What is to be their protection against the aberrations of the intellect, but the deep convictions and eager aspirations of the heart?

[John Henry Newman was beatified in 2010.]
