

MEMORANDA OF CONVERSATIONS WITH PRESIDENT HARPER

in December, 1905

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Ernest D. Burton

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Two or three days later, perhaps Tuesday or Wednesday, the 19th or 20th, I received a message in the forenoon asking me to come and see him. I found him in the north-east chamber, and when I remarked upon his change of room, he said, "Is it possible that you have not seen me since I have moved into this room? I do not know whether you can forgive yourself for staying away so long, but I am sure I cannot forgive myself for not having sent for you. It seems to me I have been here six months." But after a few words of this sort he said, "I want you to talk to me about the things we talked of before. There are only a few people that I can talk to now, or that I think could help me. I cannot think

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of anybody but you and Small. I wish you would think whether there is anybody else that could be useful to me. What is there beyond this life?"* I said, "To me it all goes back to my conviction that this is a good world. That at the heart and center of things there is mind, and that mind benevolent. But not only do I believe that it is a good world in the sense that it is under the government of a good God, but I believe also that the progress of things is toward what is better. You know already that I feel that the poets and prophets have more to teach us than the scholars and investigators, that the man of insight is wiser than the man of learning, and what the poets and the prophets dream of and hope for at length comes true if only they dream and hope for good things. Progress is slow, and there are many back-steps, but things are moving on toward the better. And this being the case I must believe that there is something beyond this world better than this. Fundamental to my thought of what that is is the thought of Jesus as I understand it, the thought, namely, that he who has come into fellowship with that spirit of goodness that is at the heart of things, can never lose that fellowship, and so can never cease to be, and because that spirit of goodness is good, and because things are moving on toward the better, the fellowship beyond this life must be better even than that of this life. And furthermore, because I cannot think of impersonal existence as better than personal life, I am almost compelled to think of the life to come as personal."

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At this point Dr. Harper interrupted me to say, "At that point you go beyond Dr. Small."

"No," I said, "I am sure that I do not, if I understand Small. I say that I cannot think of the impersonal existence as better than personal life, ^{and} yet I know, of course, that my vision is very limited, and I do not know but there may be something far better than what I call personal life. My real conviction is that the life to come must be for him who has lived in fellowship with God, personal, or something better than personal, but as I said, because I cannot think of anything better than personal, this amounts for me to say that it will be personal."

Dr. Harper's comment on these statements of mine was something like this: (I am sorry that I cannot recall his own words.) "This is good; this is helpful. But what do you mean by fellowship with God? What about the man who has not lived in fellowship with God? I cannot say anything about the rest of you, but I have a bad past. My record is not good. When you come again I want you to tell me about this." He then evidently had listened and talked as long as he was able, and I left him, after an interview of twenty minutes, or possibly half an hour.

A day or two later, I think it must have been Friday, the 22d, he again sent for me to come in. In the interval I had had some talk with Dr. Small, and learned something more concerning his state of mind as Dr. Small had learned it in his talk on Sunday than I had gained in my conversation. It was evident to us both that he was turning his mind back upon his past life and

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us both that he was turning his mind back upon his past life and

severely blaming himself for what seemed to him the shortcomings of that life. I anticipated that the second conversation would begin where the first one left off, but instead he began again upon the question of the life to come, and presently asked me, "What do you mean by fellowship with God?" I said, "There are perhaps three ways in which we might put it. We can put it in the terms in which Jesus generally put it. He thought of God as Father, and lived in the consciousness of intimate fellowship with that Father. He taught others to live in the same consciousness, and I count myself happiest when the sense of God's fatherhood and my relation to him as son is deep and vivid. Then knowing that that Father is good, it is my highest joy to know His will and do it, to think His thoughts after Him, to feel as I believe He feels. But there are times when I cannot thus think of God, when I am compelled rather to think of the universe and of the spirit of goodness and of wisdom which is at the heart of that universe, and when I have to express my communion with God not in terms of Father and son, but in the thought that so far as in me lies I will try to find whither the spirit of goodness in the universe is directing affairs, and make the purpose and the efforts of my life tell in the same direction."

As I was saying this, he interrupted me with apparent surprise, saying, "You cannot always think of God as Father?"

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The third way of expressing the fact of fellowship with God which I employed at the moment I do not now distinctly recall; perhaps it was to suggest that in the rush and business of life one may often lose alike the thought of fatherhood and the thought of the superintending spirit of the universe, simply take the day's task, plunge into it with all energy. Then if, in fact, we are with self-devotion accomplishing the task which the day brings to us, that task comes from God and in doing it we are living in fellowship with God.

In answer to some question of his, I do not now remember what, I said, "Suppose we think of it thus: The great basis and source of existence, the primeval chaos, if you will, detached from itself, particles of itself, little worlds that come out from the great universe. They are parts of the whole, but they have mysteriously the power of self-direction to some extent. Now they may in the exercise of that self-direction choose to be harmonious parts of the whole, choose to make their orbits harmonious with the movement of the great whole from which they came, or they may try to set up a little universe of their own, to direct their path without reference to, or contrary to, the principle that is guiding the whole. In the former case they are in fellowship with and harmonious with the Source of All; in the latter case they are out of harmony."

"That helps me," he said. "Now we can talk no more today. Come and see me again on Sunday."

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Sunday morning at half past ten, December 24th, I went in as he had asked me. He was asleep, but presently waking up sent for me, but only to tell me that he felt too dull and heavy to listen. I was struck in this interview and in others about this time with the old time unfailing courtesy of the man. I cannot repeat his exact words, but instead of sending me word that he was too weary to see me, or even saying this to me when I came in, he said something like this after he greeted me: "Now I do not know whether I shall stay awake if you talk to me."

By way of pleasantry I said, "My wife goes to sleep when I talk to her."

He said, "Well, I do not know whether I have energy enough to keep awake long this morning."

I said, then, "Probably I had better not stay; I will come again."

"Yes," he said, "If you would, that would be better."

Then I knew that that was what he wished to say from the beginning, but that he did not wish to ask me to go. Towards evening he sent Paul to my house to say that he felt able to see me, and about half past five I went to his house again. The chief question he had to ask me this time was, "What did Jesus Christ do for us?"

I answered, "To me, the significance of Jesus is all summed up in the statement that he is the revelation of God. Not the only revelation of God, the material universe is a revelation

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I answered, "To me, the significance of Jesus is all summed up in the statement that he is the revelation of God. Not the only revelation of God, the material universe is a revelation

of God in one respect, humanity in another, and preeminently good men. The world learns more about God from the lives of good men than in any other way, and preeminently among good men, unique among good men, stands Jesus. So far as I am able to see He is not only the best revelation of God among men, but that revelation is without flaw or defect in the moral sphere in which he is a revelation."

He recalled at this point what Small had said to him to the effect that to him the meaning of Jesus was all summed in his own statement, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," and said he had been wondering whether that was not the Hebrew way of saying, "I am the way of truth and life." I answered that I thought that that would express the thought substantially, and he repeated the phrase two or three times, "The way of truth and life."

I cannot recall the language with which he raised the point, but he asked in effect, "What was the significance of the suffering of Jesus. I answered that to me it was the disclosure of the fact that God suffered as a consequence of the sin of men. That the death of Christ was not the bearing of the penalty of man's sins in the sense that it paid that penalty, but a disclosure to the world of the great fact that the sin of men was a grief to God, and that he constantly suffered because of their sin. I could easily see from his words, though I cannot recall now precisely what he said, that in his own mind he was dwelling upon the moral shortcomings and failures of his own life, and asking

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himself what about "those sins of mine."

It occurred to me to present the matter as I suppose most Christian ministers would have done, telling him that Christ suffered the penalty of his sins upon the cross, and that the debt was paid there. But I had known and felt from the beginning that he had asked me to answer his questions because he thought I would speak right from my heart and without any conventional phraseology or theological formulas, and in my heart I did not believe any such thing, and facing a man I knew to be dying, I could not tell him that. I tried to make him see the thing which I believed to be true, that the death of Jesus is not the penalty of his sins, or of any man's but the consequence of Christ's own righteousness and the sin of this world, and that being this it was the part of Christ's revelation of God, a setting forth of the fact that every man's sin is a blow at the moral order of the universe and speaking in terms of God as Father, a grief and cause of suffering to the heavenly Father. Thus God bears the pain for my sin, and bearing it forgives it when I myself turn my back upon it and coming home to him seek fellowship with him.

As I left the house I had the feeling that I had failed at two points. First, I failed in that I ought to have told Dr. Harper how his life looked to us who knew him, for it was evident to me on reflection that my very silence would have naturally led him to think that I reproached him as severely for the shortcomings of his life as he was reproaching himself. And in the second place

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I failed, hardly knowing why, if he wanted me to pray with him and I had failed to meet his unexpressed wish in that respect. Finding Dr. Small in the Quadrangle Club on my way home I told him of my interview, and expressed my thought on the first of these two feelings. I found that Small agreed with me entirely that Dr. Harper was much distressed over the shortcomings of his life, and probably was likely to interpret our silence as sharing in his severe verdict upon it.

Christmas evening, about six o'clock I went to the Quadrangle Club, called up Dr. Harper's house and asked Samuel if there was anything I could do. Samuel answered that his father had not been well that day, but indicated no desire that I should come to the house. When I reached my house I found Dr. Small there with a carriage, and learned that Dr. Harper having overheard Samuel use my name over the telephone, had called him and asked him to ask me to come to the house. I had already left the telephone, whereupon he called up Dr. Small and asked him to come for me. Together we went to the house. Dr. Harper had moved to the southwest chamber. After greetings on both sides, Small said at once, "Dr. Harper, there is one thing we want to say to you, and that is that we do not at all agree with the harsh verdict which you are evidently passing upon your past life. We are not here to say that there have been no mistakes and no faults, but that as we know you, and we believe that we do know you thoroughly, your life has been controlled centrally by the purpose to do the work that God gave you to do. We know, of course, that you

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have been occupied with affairs and have been soiled with the dust of the everyday work and conflict, but these things were necessary, and we are perfectly confident that the main purpose of your life has been right, and that its result has been vastly helpful."

Dr. Harper heard him through, then he said, "I cannot say these things. You say them because you do not know me. Your characterization of my life is not mine. Some of the things you say are true, but personal ambition will account for a large part of what I have done."

Both of us assured him again that we believed we knew him, that we had lived in very close contact with him for thirteen years, and while not at all pretending that we saw no defects in his life, could not for a moment admit that the fruits of his life as we knew them had sprung from a heart that was other than essentially right. It seemed impossible, however, to relieve his mind at that point. He said, "I have not followed Jesus Christ as closely as I ought to have done. I have come down from the plane on which I ought to have lived. I have justified it to myself at times as necessary because I was carrying so heavy loads. But I see now that it was all wrong." Finally I said to him, "Well, suppose we take your view of it, suppose we grant all you say." He interrupted me to say, "I think we will have to take it on that basis." I went on to say that now the question is after all the experiences of life, after all its successes and failures, is it your deepest wish that your will and

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purpose should be in harmony with or contrary to that of the heavenly Father? Whether you have another year to live or a million years to live in this world or another, do you want your life in its purpose and effect to run parallel with and to be in harmony with the purpose and will of the infinite Spirit of goodness? He made so far as I remember no response in words, but it was evident what the answer in his mind was. But still it was evident that he was not wholly satisfied. And so I tried again putting it somewhat in this way: I said to him, "Dr. Harper, suppose your boy Paul had been out of harmony with you, disobedient to your wishes, rebellious and ugly, and after no matter how long a time, he should come back to you and say, 'Father, I have done wrong, I knew your way was right, but I preferred to do my own way, but now I want to do your way, I know it is a good way, and I am through with rebellion and selfwill, and I want to live in harmony in your home.' Would you say to him, 'But you or somebody else will have to be punished for that sin before you can come back,' or would you say to him, 'If that is the way you feel, Paul, come back to your father's house and to your father's love.'?" And I added, "What you would do for Paul is what God is ready to do for everyone of us." At this moment Dr. Small interrupted me with choking voice to say, "That is what Jesus taught us in the parable of the prodigal son."

I cannot write down, because I cannot recall with sufficient exactness, the conversation of the next few minutes in which all of us joined, but I remember distinctly that after some

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minutes of such conversation in which all of us were deeply moved, Dr. Harper said at length, "I can trust Him. I believe God will be as good to me as I would be to my boy."

As we were about to leave him I said, "Don't you want Small and me to pray with you?" and he said, "Yes," and both of us knelt beside the bed and prayed with him briefly.

The next morning, feeling strongly that that aspect of the matter was one good for him to dwell upon, feeling that we ought not so much to seek to diminish the intensity of his own condemnation of the wrong of his life as to deepen his conviction and sense of the forgiving goodness of God, I wrote him a very short note which I sent to him with Small's approval, something to this effect:

"If the ghost of former mistakes and sins rises up to torture you, recall Jesus' parable of the prodigal son, and feel sure that God is ready to receive us when we come back in the spirit of the penitent prodigal."

I added two or three sentences of similar purport which I do not now recall. This was Tuesday, December 26th. At noon of that day Professor Brown arrived. Toward the end of the afternoon Dr. Harper saw him.

The Baptist Theological Faculties' Union was in session December 27th and 28th, and Professor Brown and I were almost constantly occupied with this. But Wednesday afternoon Dr. Harper sent word asking that Brown, Small and I would come to see him at six o'clock. The members of the Union and our Faculty were

minutes of such conversation in which all of us were deeply moved, Dr. Harper said at length, "I can trust him. I believe God will do as good to me as I would do to my boy."

As we were about to leave him I said, "Don't you want Smell and me to pray with you?" and he said, "Yes," and both of us knelt beside the bed and prayed with him briefly.

The next morning, feeling strongly that that aspect of the matter was one good for him to dwell upon, feeling that we ought not so much to seek to diminish the intensity of his own condemnation of the wrong of his life as to deepen his conviction and sense of the forgiving goodness of God, I wrote him a very short note which I sent to him with Smell's approval,

something to this effect: "If the finger of former mistakes and sins rises up to torture you, recall Jesus' parable of the prodigal son, and feel sure that God is ready to receive us when we come back in the spirit of the penitent prodigal."

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The Baptist Theological Seminary, Union was in session December 27th and 28th, and Professor Brown and I were almost constantly occupied with this. But Wednesday afternoon Dr. Harper sent word asking that Brown, Smell and I would come to see him at six o'clock. The members of the Union and our faculty were

to dine at the Quadrangle Club at half past six. At six Small, Brown and I went to Dr. Harper's house. He expressed in his old, affectionate way his delight in seeing Brown here, and in having us all together with him. Then presently said, "Now let us talk a little. Brown, you begin."

The details of the conversation I do not particularly recall, but it was evident that his mind had undergone a considerable change, and that he was at peace about himself. He referred briefly to the help that I had been to him in a previous conversation, and added, "And Small, too." After a few minutes he said, "Now I want you all to pray with me," and asked me to begin. Each of us offered a brief prayer, and the interview closed. We had been with him about half an hour. It was a great satisfaction to us to see the difference in his state of mind, and especially to see that he had reached it not by persuading himself that there were no defects in his life, and that he could stand on his own feet, but through the assurance that the merciful Heavenly Father welcomed and received one who admitted and regretted and repudiated whatever had been wrong in his life. At the same time I think the severity of the judgment of his own life was somewhat modified.

On Thursday the 28th he asked to see Brown in the middle of the afternoon, but I did not see him. At three o'clock Friday the 29th Hulbert and Small and Brown and I gathered in his chamber at his request. As always on these occasions he expressed his pleasure in our being there, and his appreciation of what he

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called our kindness in coming to see him, and then referred very tenderly to the fact that just preceding both of his operations, the one in the spring of 1904, and the one in February, 1905, Dr. Hulbert had gathered the family around him and had led them in prayer, and spoke of the uplifting and helpful influence of those prayers. He then said he wanted us all to pray with him, suggesting that Brown should begin.

Before we complied with his request Dr. Hulbert asked if there was anything in particular he wanted Brown to pray for, to which Dr. Harper replied, "No." And then Small asked why it was that there was so great a difference between his feeling in the last week or two and his feeling as he approached his operations, saying that at that time last February, for example, he was perfectly calm and undisturbed. Dr. Harper answered that the reason was that he had no time to think then, that he for ten days before the operation had worked incessantly to accomplish for the University things which needed to be done, and referred briefly to how much of value he had accomplished at that time, and said that he was then like a man under sentence of death with certain things he must accomplish before his death, but that now he had had leisure to think things over.

We all then offered prayer, Brown, Burton, Hulbert, and Small, and when Small had finished, Dr. Harper himself prayed for himself in the first person singular. He asked for forgiveness for all that had been wrong in his life, he prayed that there might be for him a future life in which there should be

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work to do and useful tasks to be accomplished* and asked especially that if in any way his life had harmed anyone, that might be forgiven and the harm which had been done if possible and as far as possible corrected. His voice was weak, and he spoke slowly, and it was somewhat difficult to catch his words, but what I have written down I recall distinctly. He ended his prayer with the words, "And this I ask in the name of Jesus Christ." There were a few minutes of silence at the close of his prayer. No one spoke until he at length said, "There is a little matter I should like to talk over with you." Then he went on to say that it would be inevitable that something would be said about him, that probably something would be put out in print at the University concerning him after he had gone. He said he wished that nothing at all would be said, but recognized that this was impossible, and that for the sake of his family he had been wondering how the matter could be best controlled. He indicated his wish that as little as possible should be said about his last days.

But when Dr. Small said that we should of course wish to follow his wishes absolutely, and asked whether he would feel unwilling to have us say what it seemed to us necessary to be said in order to correct misapprehensions and misunderstandings, he said, "Oh no," and in effect left it entirely with us who were there then to decide what should be said. He referred to what would be written after his death about him as perhaps a pamphlet

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After we had all gone down stairs he sent for me to return, and on going in he said, "I want you to come in some time and read me the fourteenth chapter of John and the fifteenth chapter of First Corinthians, and tell me what it means. I think we shall want the family to come in, too." We arranged that I should come in at nine o'clock Sunday night. I then asked him whether he had in mind some thought about this other matter which he had not expressed, thinking it possible he might have something that he would say to me alone but which he could not well say in the presence of all of us. He answered, "No, I have not. If I had I would have spoken it out." Down stairs Small said to me, "I was moved to say up stairs that you were the person to undertake this, but I thought that it might embarrass you for me to say it there." I said, "Small, this is exactly the

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Similar remarks were made either at this time or at some time previous interview by Dr. Small, and as we were coming over to the University Dr. Small said, "I feel like shouting Hallelujah over the state of mind in which he is."

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