

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

The Responsibility of Self-Assertion.

A STUDY IN TWO CHARACTERS.

BY THE REV. JAMES MOFFATT, B.D., DUNDONALD.

'Look on me and do likewise . . . and it shall be that as I do, so shall ye do.'—JUDG. vii. 17.¹

'Be ye imitators together of me.'—PHIL. iii. 17.

'The things which ye both learned and received and heard and saw in me, these things do.'—PHIL. iv. 9.

THESE words of the leaders to the led rest upon a law that underlies the average character. Most people have at some time or other to assert themselves. For the sake of others and at any risk of misconception, it is their duty to emphasize their personalities as the media of certain truths, to lay special stress upon their individual habits and hopes, to give unwonted prominence to their own characters, to insist uncompromisingly and modestly upon attention to what they say and obedience to what they order. The reasons and methods vary. Either the influence is the immediate magnetism of a personality, for practical conduct in a crisis (*Jg 7 passim*), or it is the more delicate though not necessarily less potent call through memory and admiration (*Ph 3 and 4*) to reproduce a spirit and a character. Similarly, the recognition of this duty depends in general upon a steady consciousness of one's position at a given time and in given circumstances. A man may find himself to be the strongest person there and then, *ipso facto* responsible for guiding the conduct and shaping the minds of others. But this firm estimate of oneself would rush into open-air, sturdy natures, like that of Gideon, without analysis of motives. More reflective minds, such as Paul's, even if they happen to be naturally imperious, come to assert themselves only along some process of inward reasoning. Still, for all the varieties, there is no doubt as to the reality and value and difficulty of the attitude. The psychological fact stands, that one may be drawn to do a certain deed by observing its performance in another's life. Conversely, in the spheres of practical conduct and the formation of character—Gideon and Paul are instances—aid for other men

¹ לִמְדוּ מִי וְעָשׂוּ כְּאֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֵלֵינוּ, a curt order with an emphasis on the first word: Moore renders it, 'Learn your part from me by observing what I do.'

might be withheld were there a refusal to enforce one's claim and assert one's vital influence. Where self-assertion is a condition of assistance and a method of service, undue modesty passes into a positive temptation. Certainly the world abounds in caricatures of self-assertion. The very word is justly shadowed through its connexion with domineering, pretentious egotism, and it is small wonder that the spirit which it represents should be frequently misunderstood and avoided. But only weak people are frightened away from truth by its caricatures. Indubitably an ethical truth lies behind the term 'self-assertion.' Possibly it is a primitive lever to exert on others, but it is a lever, and as the main point is to get conscience and will moved, the use of this method is quite a legitimate function for the stronger nature.² Self-assertion helps the weaker to realize certain duties. It puts an ideal into the concrete. Consequently many who would remain motionless before a claim presented in more abstract form are roused by the effectiveness and attractiveness of duty in the persuasive guise of flesh and blood. This is obviously true of hero-worship, the extreme form of self-assertion, and its consequences. But the moderate, various forms—sentiments of loyalty, admiration, esteem—are equally energetic, and cannot be thrown aside as merely primitive. They are characteristic of certain types of susceptibility; and it is primarily through them that duty is very often conceived and executed. Hence to stimulate these forms and feelings is a sound part of human responsibility.

Often the responsibility lies in the exigencies of the case. In the primitive age of these Hebrew tribal chiefs each hero stood for and by himself in his own district. The sphere was local. Israel was broken up into particular clans and groups,

² *Jg 5², 2a*—

'For that the leaders took the lead in Israel,
For that the people offered themselves willingly,
Bless ye, Yahveh.
My heart is toward the governors of Israel,
That offered themselves willingly among the people.'

each of which evidently depended upon the special exertions and ability of its own leader, and for the central territory Gideon became responsible. To carry his work through he required from others a common spirit of loyalty and a somewhat lofty character. For this standard, as the narrative implies,—Hebrew religion being at the moment 'immature' and 'unstable'¹ generally,—the Manassite leader had nowhere to point save to himself. The difficulty of religious patriotism, the paucity of awakened consciences, the comparatively isolated nature of the clans, demanded this self-emphasis. It was through imitation of his own forceful actions, as a clear object-lesson, that the conscience of the loth could alone be raised and trained. Gideon, like Wolfe, most probably

where'er he fought,
Put so much of his heart into his act,
That his example had a magnet's force,
And all were swift to follow whom all loved.

But this unconscious attraction was backed by the conscious call (7¹⁷) to a like process. For special crises ordinary natures need such vigorous definite challenges to their will and heart. The competing forces of custom (Jg 8⁶ etc.) are strong: the disinclination to make a change, the obstinate desire to let things alone, the inability to act on one's personal initiative, these and other obstacles thwart every movement like that of Gideon's. If it is to be achieved, the supreme method is enthusiasm for a cause robed in a personality. In a great reform of manners or opinion, the many are usually sensitive to the decisive will and mind of him who does not scruple to declare: 'Do what I do and you do God's work. Help me and you are helping Him.' Only thus are the well-meaning spurred into energetic co-operation.

Similarly in the case of general character. In the seventh decade of the first Christian century, with the N.T. yet unwritten, the living ideal of the Christ-life was far from being stereotyped in words or habits. Fluid and free, its appeal had to come largely through men's experience and observation of one another, and the inevitable reproduction of character (Ph 3¹⁷). The channel of education was chiefly the seen or remembered character of definite individuals, the advice and conduct of the best people (Heb 13⁷). Probably for each com-

munity one or two, dead or living, absent or present, represented the ideal of the Christian spirit. Acquaintance with these became a standard and stimulus to the rest, who were thus enabled to preserve some sense of definiteness, cohesion, and actuality in their ideas of the faith. Paul was perfectly aware his friends were surrounded in Philippi by other and opposing types of character, not merely pagan, but semi-Christian (Ph 3^{18, 19}). Such ideals were fascinating, close, solid. His own, he knew, was yet uncommon; if it was to become through memory (1³⁰) and admiration any power, it required emphasis and repetition. Hence, under the circumstances, there was no alternative save to point men to their impressions and memories of himself. He had to stand for a palpable ideal of Christianity. In view of outside competing claims, to reproduce the Christian character demanded an effort (*συνμμηται γίνεσθε*) against inward indolence and reluctance.² Obviously, to aid this struggling aspiration by means of his own vivid and consistent character became for the apostle a sensible, clear line of mission. He was charged more than ever with the task of making visible³ in himself the new spirit and distinctiveness of Christian experience, until it became permanent, intelligible, and attractive by itself to others. And for all the popularization of the Christian ideal since the first century, this function—representing pretty much what is covered by the old Hebrew phrase, 'to be made a god to' a person (*e.g.* Ex 7¹)—has not yet become an anachronism. According to the sincerity and richness of his character, each man still stands to some others authoritatively for a more or less large portion of the ideal. The further bearing of the principle upon education, friendship, and religion is sufficiently obvious; instances of these surround us in all spheres.

The natural scruples which are started by any counsel of this kind run in two directions. Self-assertion is charged with pride. But pride is merely the accompanying risk, not the inevitable element, of genuine self-assertion, and men like Gideon and Paul are stamped for the most part with a simple, firm modesty in their services. This is plainly noted in the records. Gideon

² Cf. Heb 6¹², *ὅνα μὴ πωθοῖ γέννησθε, μιμηταὶ δὲ, κ.τ.λ.*

³ 'Through such souls alone

God stooping shows sufficient of His light
For us if the dark to rise by. And I rise.'

¹ Montefiore, *Hibbert Lectures*, p. 58. Professor Davidson calls the period 'the workshop in which the nation, as we know it, was fashioned' (*Expositor*, 3rd series, vol. v. p. 54).

built his altar to and named it after Yahweh (Jg 6²⁴). Once sure of its divinity, he accepted his commission. His 'signs' are proof of a certain reliance upon Yahweh in the earlier moments of despondency (6¹³), which was not lost in the later flush of personal success (87). In both narratives the religious significance of the call is marked (6³⁴ with 6¹⁴⁻¹⁶); his war-cry is "וַיִּהְיֶה נִגְוֹ" (7¹⁸). And this conception of his character is touched by implication in the later literature.¹ Even this stalwart, rude chief was held to have wrought his work *διὰ πίστεως*,² sensitive to the need as to the control of a divine Will in his career. All over, the conception of his character, even in the Book of the Judges, shows no remarkable trace of self-pretension. Paul equally guarded himself against the suspicion of arrogance, deliberately (*καθὼς κἀγὼ Χριστοῦ*, 1 Co 11¹) or inferentially (as here, *vide* the context and the close of the paragraph in 4¹, *οὕτως ἐν κυρίῳ*). Curiously enough, his commission is almost verbally identical with that of Gideon.³ Also, their resource of power is common,⁴ deliberate obedience to the unseen, and this does not easily succumb to pride before men. The fact is, most people are apt to shrink from 'asserting' themselves, not so much because it outrages their fine modesty, as from the depressing sense of incongruity. To direct attention to their personal lives would be to court ridicule. They are conscious of inspiring neither respect nor any thrilling admiration, thanks to the trivial, inconsistent character which they actually possess. Hence they fear, and fear justly, the obvious retort. Genuine self-assertion is impossible to the majority, not through their humility, but through their moral poverty. Hesi-

tation and scruples on this line are more often the result of conscious failure than the fear of subtle pride. As the characters of Gideon and Paul imply, the best safeguard against the self-important spirit is the sheer sense of responsibility for oneself and others. Definite, practical dependence upon a higher Will and Power furnishes the natural salvation from pharisaism. Besides, pride is impossible in regard to objects which are common to all, and these two men persistently refuse to be considered exceptional. 'Brilliant' and 'unique' are not the adjectives for their lives; they are not content to pose upon an altitude impossible to the rank and file. Evidently they indicate their vigour and attainments are the effect of Another's life which is being brought to emphasis in them specially in order that others may recognize its real nature, and believe it lies open equally to themselves. That is the condition, as it is the object, of self-assertion, to interpret and mediate for others a universal possession.⁵

This answers by anticipation the companion-scruple which charges self-assertion with barrenness. Sincerely practised for the will and in the work of Another it is not vain. Such obedience carries a power in it. As a matter of fact those whose confidence comes through loyalty to God are the people who win confidence and loyalty from others. Gideon drew after him a company (Jg 6²⁷⁻⁷⁸), and Paul's power of attracting younger men to himself is patent. Already he had, as we say, a school (*e.g.* *ἡμᾶς* Ph 3¹⁷) of sympathetic (1 Co 4¹⁷) followers. In self-assertion he had absolute confidence; it had been his method from the first (1 Th 1⁹), and long ago his power of impressing others had produced results which were accepted facts (2 Th 3⁷). 'Where he did such good work,' writes Mr. Meredith, outlining the character of a youthful leader, 'was in sharpening the fellows to excel, . . . and it was not done by exhortations off a pedestal, like St. Paul at the Athenians, it breathed out of him every day of the week. He carried a light for followers. Whatever he demanded of them, he himself did it easily.' But neither in Athens nor elsewhere does Paul seem to

¹ Eccles 46¹¹—

'Also the judges, every one by his name,
All whose hearts went not a-whoring,
And who turned not away from the Lord.'

² Heb 11³²⁻³³, 'Gideon was the best ruler that could be found—the noblest in character, most prompt, and yet efficient in word and deed; formed for rule, yet without lust of rule; preferring renunciation, and yielding to the higher duties of religion.'—EWALD.

³ Jg 6¹⁴, Πορεύου . . . ἰδοὺ ἐξαπαστείλα σε (LXX) = Ac 22²¹, πορεύου, ὅτι ἐγὼ ἐξαπαστέλω σε.

⁴ Jg 6³⁴, Καὶ πνεῦμα Κυρίου ἐνεδυναμώσεν τὸν Γεδεὼν = Ph 4¹⁸, πάντα ἰσχύω ἐν τῷ ἐνδυναμοῦντί με. Cf. Ac 9²², Σαῦλος δὲ μάλλον ἐδυναμοῦτο. One might compare also the decisive iconoclasm (Jg 6²⁵⁻³⁰ = Ac 17²⁸, 1 Co 8^{4, 9}) and unflagging perseverance of the two men (Jg 8⁴, *πεινῶντες καὶ διώκοντες* with Ph 4¹² 3¹², *διώκω δὲ . . . μεμύημαι, καὶ χορτάζεσθαι καὶ πεινᾶν*).

⁵ Students of English literature will recognize the same principle applied by Carlyle to politics (*Chartism*, ch. vi.), Ruskin to art (*Modern Painters*, III. iv. 10, § 19), Faber to the Roman office of spiritual director (*Growth in Holiness*, ch. xviii.), and Martineau to the ethics of influence (*Study of Religion*, ii. pp. 29-33).

have been addicted to the pedestal-method. Otherwise his self-assertion would have missed effectiveness. His power, like that of Gideon, lay mostly in a serene self-confidence born of personal devotion to the cause and of a measure of achievement: ἔχετε τυπού, as he told others, the personal standard¹ was plain, common, verifiable. Where advice is backed in this way by a consistently advancing character, it becomes as nearly irresistible as any force may be in the field of human nature.

Such scruples, in fact, merely emphasize the pressing need of care for the personal life. Self-assertion is worse than futile unless it comes out of a long unselfish career with a transparent devotion; and this fact touches these special indispensable points in the two characters now under discussion: (a) a scrupulous desire to know God and do his will, to have no by-ends or private ambitions, to have an honest, adequate theory of one's career (Ph 1²⁰⁻²⁵), and to be concerned for and sure of God's presence in life (cf. Gideon's 'signs'); (b) a growing experience to which others can be called (Ph 3⁷⁻¹⁶), or some heroic sense of the undone (Jg 7, 8). The measure of a man's power over others depends on this sense of personal inadequacy and passion for growth. The magnetic life is the life which is being changed, responding to new calls and higher visions for itself before it goes out to impose any upon others; (c) decisiveness in the central vital points. Between flexible consideration for others and the sense of personal shortcoming, the unflinching convictions have to be kept strong: Gideon knew and took his course, Paul had his line of action (Ph 3^{8, 13-14} 4⁹ πρόσσπερε). Not long ago Mr. Frederic Harrison expressed his wonder that in an age of such large transitions as our own a man of so little elasticity as the late Canon Liddon should have wielded such considerable power. The answer probably lies in the inherent authority of conviction—apart sometimes from the quality of its contents—over many minds. Severe, unflinching, urgent decisiveness exerts a charm of quite exceptional strength; (d) unselfish interest in others: *vide* Gideon's brooding over the Hebrew wrongs (Jg 6^{13, 37} with 8³⁵) and Paul's generous affection (Ph 1^{24, 25} 2^{17, 18}). These four qualities, with the addition perhaps of unostentatious diligence (2 Th 3⁷, Jg 6^{11, 12}), constitute the preparation for successful 'self-assertion.' Upon this good conscience depends the courage, the moral fearlessness

¹ Cf. his reply and challenge to Agrippa (Ac 26²⁹).

ness with which a man can point to his own character, if need be, or allow it to be noticed and discussed (Mt 5¹⁴⁻¹⁶), not afraid of a reasonable scrutiny, and superbly confident of its influential results.²

This courage is a further phase, however. The inner goodness may quite well exist without the completing step by which one takes his place thus openly in relation to other men, for the latter is often a perfect trial and compulsion. Still it is a vocation. In Gideon's unsophisticated nature no such traces of reluctance appear, and Paul seems untouched—so far as extant records go—by any scruples or need of self-conquest on this point. 'If he were not sure that he was a great man, he was at least sure that he was one set apart to do great things.'³ Stevenson is speaking of John Knox, and he proceeds thus aptly: 'There may be something more finely sensitive in the modern humour, that tends more and more to withdraw a man's personality from the lessons he inculcates or the cause that he has espoused; but there is a loss herewith of wholesome responsibility; and when we find in the works of Knox, as in the epistles of Paul, the man himself standing nakedly forward, courting and anticipating criticism, putting his character, as it were, in pledge for the sincerity of his doctrine, we had best waive the question of delicacy, and make our acknowledgments for a lesson of courage, not unnecessary in these days of anonymous criticism, and much light, otherwise unattainable, on the spirit in which great movements were initiated and carried forward.' Either after or against this vindication there is little left that need be said.

At the same time self-assertion has its limits, and is responsible for observing them. The charge is often levelled against the strong characters of the world, like Augustine, Calvin, and Loyola, that they are too ambitious to have others cast in their own mould, sacrificing individuality to a single imperious type. This is a real danger, and it is fostered by the easy contentment of many people in a blind obedience or a false submission to more powerful wills. To live thus among second-hand views is to be losing the soul. Complete deference even to the dominion of a good person is ultimately a paralysis. Consequently it is necessary

² E.g. Ph 4⁹, καὶ ὁ θεὸς τῆς εἰρήνης ἔσται μεθ' ὑμῶν, καὶ= and so.

³ *Men and Books*, pp. 334, 335.

that individuality be respected¹ and its value enhanced. No mere *ipse dixit* will suffice. Self-assertion really implies a more or less intelligent imitation (Ph 4⁹), and that even in the case of practical energy:—the ideas and the scope of Gideon's clever military scheme, for example, were not merely imposed on others as authoritative, but explained in part to them (Jg 7¹⁶⁻¹⁸). A true relation of this kind involves on the side of the recipient a constant effort and desire to understand, and upon the side of the stronger nature a scrupulous provision and care to prevent the extinction or undue suppression of the other's genuine self. In this way self-assertion, by its very success, may become eventually superfluous in a given direction, as the weaker character is lifted to the other's level, and enabled to think

¹ E.g. Ph 3^{15, 16}, καὶ ἐν τῷ ἐρέρω φρονεῖτε.

and act without continuous incitement or instruction from the outside. Such at least is the goal of true development. Self-assertion must be counted educative and provisional. 'Faut-il toujours que l'on nous avertisse et ne pouvons-nous tomber à genoux que si quelqu'un est là pour nous dire que Dieu passe?' Consequently the responsibility for self-assertion covers the need not only of understanding where and how to exert this influence of personality, but also of determining the suitable occasions upon which it should be withheld, and the particular individuals to whom its unrestrained action might become a source of moral weakness. For if this ascendancy of the higher over the lower experience is to be a genuine factor in the latter's moral growth, the pressure must be healthy; that is to say, of sincere intention, but also and especially, timely chosen.

Recent Foreign Theology.

The Rothe Centenary.

IN THE EXPOSITORY TIMES for May the Rev. David Eaton called attention to some of the more important publications which have appeared in connexion with the celebration of Rothe's hundredth birthday. Two pamphlets¹ recently issued contain full reports of the memorial addresses delivered by Dr. Tröltsch and Dr. Lemme; an interesting account is also given by Dr. Lemme of the origin of the movement to erect a permanent memorial to the famous Heidelberg theologian. During the thirty years that have intervened since Rothe's death other names have become prominent, and it is rightly regarded as a proof of the widespread and permanent influence of his teaching that the response to the appeal for funds should have been so general and so generous as to enable the committee to establish a Prize Fund, as well as to carry out their original

¹ *Richard Rothe's Hundertjahrfeier*. Denkschrift des Rothe-Denkmal-Komitees. Heidelberg: Gustav Köster. *Richard Rothe*. Gedächtnissrede gehalten von Dr. Ernst Tröltsch, z. Z. Dekan der theologischen Fakultät zu Heidelberg. Freiburg i. B.: J. C. B. Mohr.

design of placing a marble bust of Rothe in St. Peter's Church, where he so often preached.

Happily, some attempts to use the celebration for party purposes were frustrated. In the committee's appeal it is recognized that few would be in absolute agreement with all the details of Rothe's teaching, for, on the one hand, as a mediating theologian he is still regarded by many conservative Lutherans as heterodox, whilst, on the other hand, to more liberal thinkers his supernaturalism and belief in miracles are a stumbling-block. The result has proved that many who would not call themselves disciples of Rothe, and who represent opposing schools of thought, have been glad to unite in doing honour to the memory of one who was an original, stimulating, and reverent thinker, whose boldest inquiries were conducted in a truly pious spirit, and whose independent research has cast light upon many problems of theology, Church history, and ethics.

Dr. Tröltsch's address was delivered in the Aula of Heidelberg University, and is remarkable for its suggestive description of the life and times of Rothe. Born in the golden age of German literature, when the Romanticism of the Weimar school was beginning to unite with the speculative