



Bishop Joseph Flintoft Berry

The Personal Testimony of Bishop Joseph F. Berry

(1913)

Editor's Note: The following address was delivered on Friday, January 10, 1913 in Wesley Hall of the Methodist Building at 1018 Arch Street. It was given to the editor by Rev. Burns Brodhead, who found it among family papers, the possession of one of his ministerial ancestors, probably Rev. Charles D. Brodhead, who then led the well-known Philadelphia Friday Meeting at the Arch Street building. From the opening paragraph, the document appears to be a transcript of the bishop's remarks, and it has been edited for publication by the editor. Bishop Joseph Flintoft Berry (1856-1931) began his ministry with the Detroit Conference in 1874, and was elected to the episcopacy in 1904. Appointed to the Philadelphia area in 1912, he served as the presiding bishop of the Philadelphia Conference for 16 years, before retiring in 1928.

I am very sorry that I had to be a half an hour late in arriving. I left the office in time, but was way-laid by an item of great importance that could not be avoided, and I fairly ran after that was over to get here on time. Even at this late hour, I think that I have discovered from the spirit of the meeting that you have been employing your time in a very profitable manner. The Spirit of God reigns over the meeting.

I do not think that I could do better at this meeting than to tell you a moment or two of my experiences that are the most dear and vital and real facts in all my life. No facts in my history are quite so real and none that I would have such difficulty in denying as these two great central facts in my life.

The first experience was that of my conversion. I was converted through and through, and that is an experience that I shall never forget, nor regret. My father was a minister in the Methodist Episcopal Church,

and one who was very conscientious about his work. Three years ago, he went up to meet his Creator in heaven. He was not a great orator, but he was a great worker, and though he aspired to do so, he did not do any great or wonderful work. There were obstacles in his way such as we find in every church, and in consequence he went to meet his Creator, having done nothing great to commemorate him.

When I was fourteen years of age, I was converted, and I shall never forget it. A great revival was in sway at my father's church. And my two chums, Bert and George, and I made a covenant that only one of us was to be converted at this meeting. As I said, we were only fourteen years of age, but we knew a lot, at least we thought we did. We knew all about politics; were thoroughly versed in philosophy and theology, but we specialized in psychology. I had notions that the church was only for the old folks and for the children, and not for men such as we were. Consequently we did not go to the revival.

One Saturday morning at breakfast, father said to me, "Boy, I wonder if you could guess who were converted at last evening?" "No, father, I cannot guess." Father smiled and leaning over said, "Your two chums, Bert and George. They were both converted." I was dumbstruck. They had broken their covenant, and had been converted without even as much as consulting me. My appetite failed, and I was disheartened. I left the house and went downtown with a great weight on my mind. At the office I made slow progress. One of my eyes was on my work, and the other was on the door, and I waited and watched expectantly all day long for my two chums to appear at the door, but they did not appear, and I went home feeling rather blue and cross. Father had not said that they had been converted; he had not said that they were ready for church membership; but had said that they were "gloriously converted" and that seemed to irritate me.

After dinner that evening, the door bell rang and the maid answering it announced that there were two young men waiting to see me in the parlor. Of course, it was George and Bert. I walked into the parlor and greeted them, and after a rather awkward attempt at conversation we decided to go out into the air and take a walk. It was dark and gloomy outside, and as we walked along, our conversation was such a trifling and awkward one that we finally ceased talking altogether and contented ourselves with just walking. Presently, we passed a drug store with a brightly lighted window, the light from which illuminated our faces as we passed; and glancing at George, I noticed that his face seemed to be dripping with perspiration and pressing

against Bert. While passing through a crowd, I noticed that his hand was very warm as with fever. They were laboring under anxiety for me. Finally, we came to George's house and George and Bert decided to hold a meeting there and invited me to come in. Using my appearance as an excuse, I declined, saying that I did not care to meet George's sister unless I was dressed up. They, however, would not hear an excuse, so they proposed that we retire to the parsonage and hold the meeting in my room, but I said, "No, the folks are house cleaning, and my room is all upset." They persisted, however, and we decided to hold our meeting in the barn back of the parsonage.

Upon reaching the barn, one of the boys hooked the door after him so we wouldn't be disturbed. I staggered across the room to a little pile of hay in one corner and fell down on my knees. Then the prayer meeting began. But I alone was doing the praying, with George and Bert looking on, full of anxiety. How long I was thus engaged, I do not know, but I was finally interrupted by the appearance of my mother.

Father had been out to a revival meeting that night and got home rather late. Upon going into the house mother said, "Did you hear a strange noise outside as though someone were in distress?" Father lifted the window and said, "It sounds like someone praying in distress." Mother instantly recognized my voice and cried, "Don't you know that voice? That's Joe, as sure as you live." Mother then rushed down the stairs and out to the barn. Rapping on the door, she asked if she could come in.

Mother's voice always sounded sweet, but at that moment, it sounded like an angel's. She came in and threw herself beside me, and embraced me. "Oh, Mother, I have been praying here all night, help me." "Why, child, I cannot help you. Jesus is here to help you." At these words I looked up and it seemed as if a great light had entered the room and then I raised my head and said, "Oh, Lord, I know thou art here. I have been blind not to have known that you were here with me." Then I was thrilled with this new feeling and I walked and leaped about. Then my companions led me out of the barn and suggested that I should retire. It was then 12:30, but though I felt unusually tired, I told them that I could not sleep with that feeling upon me. After having convinced them that I could not sleep, I persuaded them to go out and take a walk with me.

We walked up and down the streets of the village where we had unconverted chums, and brought them out and told them that another boy had been "gloriously converted." Before we retired that night, we



A photo from 1915, showing Bishop Joseph Berry dedicating the cornerstone of a new education building for the Tacony Methodist Episcopal Church in Northeast Philadelphia.

had the satisfaction of seeing three more boys “gloriously converted.” Two of the boys are Methodist Episcopal preachers in this city today.

From that moment in the old barn – I know the spot well – from that moment there, had never come into my mind a doubt as to God’s power. Later, I entered the ministry and for fourteen years, I did duty as the leader of the young people’s organization of my denomination.¹ After five years as leader, I felt the sudden lack of courage; a lack of knowing the will of God. There was that consciousness that something was lacking in courage and determination.

Shortly after, I attended the funeral of President McKinley and saw him laid to rest. There was sung that most beautiful hymn, “Nearer My God to Thee.” I heard the people from all walks of life, from every nation and religion, make that prayer, not knowing what they were

¹Berry refers to the Epworth League, the youth organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church, forerunner of today’s United Methodist Youth Fellowship (UMYF). For fourteen years, he was editor of the *Epworth Herald*, the organization’s national publication, and he also wrote the book, *Four Wonderful Years: A Sketch of the Origin, Growth and Working Plans of the Epworth League* (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1893).

singing, but just seeking to be lifted up close to God and God's heart. But for some reason that song grated on my nerves and seemed to irritate me, and for months I never sang that song because I could not honestly do it. I had ambition; I had made plans; and I willed to do certain things. And I was afraid that what I had willed might not be the will of God, and on account of these ambitions and plans, I was afraid that I was not "Nearer My God to Thee." I worked very hard at my plans, and all the time I worked and that song was sung, I was silent.

One evening I went to a prayer meeting with my wife, and they sang that same familiar hymn. But struggle as I would, the tempest raged within me, and finally I yielded, and lifting my heart and soul to God, I said, "Oh, God, this is a serious matter. It means the ultimate surrender of everything I may call dear. On the other hand, it means more. It means that if thou shalt lay a cross across my pathway, a cross that shall turn me aside, I shall welcome it." And there I gave up all my plans and ambitions to the greater thing that God meant me to do, and I sang that hymn with the ardour of my soul. The moment I began to sing, I was lifted into communion with my Lord; not from sin alone, but from the dominion of sin and selfish ambition.

I went out that night with a new vision; not of selfish plans and ambitions, but to lead a new and unselfish life, not for myself alone, but for those about me, just as Jesus had done.

Brothers and sisters, I am so glad that Jesus came into the world to save. He came to save the whole world, not favorite spots or parts of it. He came to save all the world, all the time. Not in storms; not in sunshine; not in the arctic north; nor in the tropical south; but all places and all times, in the midst of sorrow and suffering, and in the midst of joy and gladness.

He came to save ALL THE WORLD FROM ITS SINS; ALL THE WORLD, ALL THE TIME, FROM ITS SINS.

Now, brothers and sisters, I will have to close as the time is limited. God bless you and give you the consciousness of perpetual truth; the blood that still flows, that still cleanses, that can do everything for you.

Bless his holy name!

Amen.