

A Story That Does Not End Well: Marianne Hearne

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Marianne Hearne experienced her first real crisis of faith when she was just five or six years old. She attended a good church with her family and learned to love God through the teaching of her parents, church and extended family. So it was natural that when Marianne had a problem, she turned to God.



It seemed such a *big* problem to such a *little* girl—a torn pinafore that was sure to disappoint her mother. At bedtime, Marianne hung her frock on a hook and devoted herself to prayer. Over and over she begged, “O Lord, have mercy upon me, and mend my pinafore for me, for Jesus’ sake, Amen.” And every few minutes she hopped up to measure the hole, for a while convinced that it was indeed getting smaller. But finally the realization dawned on her that nothing was happening. She cried bitterly in disappointment with God.

Just then, Marianne’s aunt happened by her room and went in to kiss her goodnight. Seeing her tears, she gathered her up in her arms to comfort her. Marianne sobbed out her story. “I will mend it for you,” said her aunt. “Perhaps that is God’s way of answering you. Perhaps He sent me in here tonight on purpose.” The pinafore was mended, as was Marianne’s faith.

That pattern of God sending a person to minister to Marianne during crises of faith would continue throughout her life. The next time was just a few years later, when Marianne was 12 years old and her mother suffered a long and difficult illness. Marianne prayed for her mother’s healing, and when that didn’t work, she began to bargain with God. “O Lord, if you must have one, “ she prayed, “please take our father to heaven and leave us our dear mother.” Then later, “Let us all die when Mother dies, if she must.”

Mother died on Christmas Day and Marianne thought that “the Babe of Bethlehem could never be anything more to me again.” When her crushing grief began to recede, anger took its place. She still went to church each week, and sat through the sermons seething, indignant and antagonistic. One day her Sunday school teacher, Miss Eliza, beckoned her to sit beside her. She reached for Marianne’s hand with a look of infinite compassion.

Marianne later wrote that as she sat holding her teacher’s hand and listening to the sermon “All bitterness died out of my heart. At first compunction, the penitence, then resolve, then peace took possession of me, and I was quite another child when the service came to an end, for my heart was full of love and joy.” Through just a kind look and a small gesture, the teacher’s love became a catalyst for Marianne’s healing.

Marianne grew up to become a famous writer and editor in England. She knew George Muller and considered Charles Spurgeon a lifelong friend. She edited a Sunday school newspaper with a weekly circulation of over 130,000 people, wrote books and taught a Bible class of young women. She was solidly established in the public eye as an evangelical leader and an example for women to follow. That made what happened next even worse.

On May 3, 1873, a newspaper called *The Christian World* began to publically question the truth of basic doctrines like the existence of hell, the literal reality of the creation account and the infallible inspiration of the Bible. They were influenced by a movement that burned through England in the late 19th century, leaving the rubble of a dead church behind. Marianne said that this declaration broke her heart. *The Christian World* was a sister publication to her Sunday school paper. What would become of her if she publically disagreed with their new theology?

Within days, men from her church came to her and asked her to distance herself from the publication. Her friend Charles Spurgeon took a public stand on the issue (labeling it the Downgrade Controversy) and clearly proclaimed that this was not an area on which a Christian could compromise. An older couple came to Marianne and offered to let her live with them for the rest of her life so that she need not corrupt her faith for the sake of an income. God provided many people to help Marianne through this crisis of faith. But this time she didn’t submit.

She later wrote, “I am afraid I acted a coward’s part. I was so busy that I resolved not to spare the time, at present, to try to solve the great problems for myself.” Already attracted to the teaching of Universalism, Marianne allowed herself to slide into the new theology without thinking seriously about it or praying it through. This heretical teaching riddles her writing in the last half of her life, rendering it useless to the Kingdom of God.

Could this happen to you or to me? After being well taught in a good church, might we also fall into false teaching? The Apostle Paul left us a command in his letter to Timothy to combat just such a temptation:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

2 Timothy 3:14-16

If Marianne can’t serve the church as an example, let her serve as a warning.

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