



James Buchanan

L I F E
OF
JAMES BUCHANAN

FIFTEENTH PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

BY
✓
GEORGE TICKNOR CURTIS

IN TWO VOLUMES

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sion of Satan than the Son of God. But two things are to be taken into the account. Notwithstanding the present condition of the estate it contains very *valuable* and *convertible* materials."

That he did not make what is called a public profession of religion until a late period of his life is accounted for in an interesting paper which I have received from the Rev. William M. Paxton, D.D., pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, in the City of New York. Dr. Paxton, in answer to my inquiry, kindly wrote to me on the 11th of April, 1883, as follows:

In the month of August, in the year 1860, Mr. Buchanan, then President of the United States, visited the Bedford Springs, in the State of Pennsylvania. I happened to be present when the stage arrived, and having had a previous personal acquaintance with him, was one of the first to bid him welcome.

A day or two afterwards, as he passed me in the hall, he stopped and said, "May I take the liberty of sending for you to come to my room, when I can find leisure for a conversation?" To this I replied that it would give me great pleasure to obey such a call. The next day the invitation came, through his private secretary, and when we were seated alone, he turned to me and said, "I sent for you to request that you will favor me with a conversation upon the subject of religion. I knew your father and mother in early life, and, as you have some knowledge of my family, you are aware that I was religiously educated. But for some years I have been much more thoughtful than formerly upon religious subjects. I think I may say that for twelve years I have been in the habit of reading the Bible and praying daily. I have never had any one with whom I have felt disposed to converse, but now that I find you here, I have thought that you would understand my feelings, and that I would venture to open my mind to you upon this important subject, and ask for an explanation of some things that I do not clearly understand." When I had assured him that I would be gratified to have such a conversation, he began immediately by asking, "Will you be good enough to explain to me what an experience of religion is?" In answer, I opened to him the Bible account of our sinful estate, and of the necessity of regeneration by the Spirit of God, and of atonement through the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ. He then began to question me, as closely as a lawyer would question a witness, upon all the points connected with regeneration, atonement, repentance and faith. What surprised me was that his questions were not so much of a doctrinal as of an experimental character. He seemed anxious to understand how a man might know that he was a Christian, and what conscious experiences entered into the exercises of repentance and faith. It is needless for me to detail the particulars of the conversation. It gave me an opportunity of speaking to him in the most simple and familiar way. When I related the experience of some eminent Christian, or used a simple illustration, such as I have employed

in Sabbath school addresses, he seemed much gratified, and proceeded to put his questions to draw out still more definite explanations. He particularly was anxious to understand how faith receives and appropriates the Lord Jesus Christ, and how a man may know that he believes. He put himself in the position of a little child, and asked questions in the simplest manner. Sometimes he asked me to go over an explanation a second time, as if he wished to fix it upon his memory. His manner was so earnest, and his mind was evidently so deeply engaged, that I was strongly impressed with the conviction of his entire sincerity.

After the more experimental points had been disposed of, he asked a few purely doctrinal questions, the answers to which he received without any disposition to enter upon a discussion. At the close of the conversation, he asked particularly what were the conditions of membership in the Presbyterian Church, and what were the points upon which an applicant for admission would be examined. The conversation lasted, probably, from two to three hours. After sitting quiet for a few minutes, he said, "Well, sir, I thank you. My mind is now made up. I hope that I am a Christian. I think I have much of the experience which you describe, and, as soon as I retire from my office as President, I will unite with the Presbyterian Church." To this, I replied, "Why not *now*, Mr. President? God's invitation is *now*, and you should not say *to-morrow*." To this he answered, with deep feeling, and with a strong gesture, "I must delay, for the *honor of religion*. If I were to unite with the Church *now*, they would say hypocrite from Maine to Georgia." I felt the truth of his answer, and did not continue my urgency.

This closed our conversation, but, as Mr. Buchanan remained at the Springs for some time, he seemed to seize every opportunity, when he met me in the hall or in the parlor, to ask some question which he had been pondering, or to repeat some passage of Scripture upon which his mind had been dwelling, and ask how I understood it. For example, meeting me in the passage, he asked me the meaning of the verse, "The bruised reed he will not break: the smoking flax he will not quench;" and when I explained the figures, and showed how beautifully they expressed the tenderness of our Lord, he seemed to exhibit the most simple-hearted gratification.

I take pleasure in giving these recollections for record, because I have never entertained a doubt of the entire honesty of Mr. Buchanan's religious impressions. I did not agree with him in politics, or feel any sympathy with his public career; but I think that he is entitled to this testimony from one who was placed in circumstances to judge fairly of the reality of his religious convictions. The purpose which President Buchanan expressed to me of uniting with the Church was fulfilled. He connected himself with the Presbyterian Church in Lancaster, Pa., immediately after his retirement from the Presidential chair.

Mr. J. Buchanan Henry concludes his communication to me, from which I have already quoted, as follows: