

# THE WESLEYAN.

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IN CONNECTION WITH THE BRITISH CONFERENCE.

"LET US CONSIDER ONE ANOTHER TO PROVOKE UNTO LOVE AND TO GOOD WORKS."—HEBREWS x. 24.

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## DIVINITY.

### THE WITNESSING CHURCH.

A SERMON,

BY THE REV. JOHN HARRIS.

"Ye are my witnesses, saith the Lord, that I am God."—Isaiah xliii. 12.

[CONCLUDED.]

#### IV.

We have now seen that the Christian church is, in its very constitution and design, a missionary church—that its history illustrates this truth—and that all the original motives for enforcing it still exist, and exist in ever-accumulating force. What, then, can be more appropriate for us, *fourthly*, than to survey our condition, and estimate our wants, in relation to that design, to profit by that history, and to yield obedience to those motives.

1. Now, it must be obvious, that whatever else may be necessary, a vivid and all-pervading apprehension of the original design of the church is of the first importance. "But do not our various aggressive efforts shew that we have already recovered that apprehension?" To a very limited extent. Until recently, the Christian church was well nigh as local and stationary as the Jewish. And, as might be expected, considering the state of its piety, its movements, since it began to awake, have been fitful and uncertain, rather than healthy and regular. Are not its members, still, too content, generally speaking, with supporting a ministry for themselves alone; and thus resembling the local character of the Jewish church? Is not the clear apprehension of its missionary design confined still to a small minority? Or, if felt by the many, felt only as a passing impulse—the result of an annual appeal, rather than as a personal obligation, and a universal principle? Or, if felt as a claim, felt as a duty to be easily devolved, and discharged by proxy?

Brethren, according to the theory of the Christian church, every one of its members is a witness for Christ. In making you, Christian, a partaker of his grace, he not only intended your own salvation—he intended the salvation of others by your instrumentality—he intended that you should go forth from his presence as a witness, conveying to the world the cheering intelligence that he is still pardoning and saving sinners—sitting on his throne of mercy, waiting to be gracious to them, as he has been to you. He says to you, in effect, "You have given yourselves to me, and I give you to the world—give you as my witnesses: look on yourselves as dedicated to this office—dedicated from eternity." Brethren, your very business, as Christians, your calling, is to propagate your religion. Is the gospel-cause a warfare? Every Christian present is suborned as a witness for God. Look on yourself in this light, and you will not, on the ground of disqualification, dismiss the subject from your mind. You will not think that a mere annual subscription buys you off from that great duty for which God has made you a Christian. "I cannot speak for Christ," said a martyr, on his way to the flames, "but I can die for him." And, in the same martyr spirit, you will say, "I cannot speak for Christ—would that I could—the world should hear of him; my lips cannot speak for him, but my life shall; my tongue cannot witness, but others can; and, if property can aid, and prayers prevail, they shall." Brethren, this is simply the sentiment of scripture; this was the spirit of the primitive saints. They looked on themselves individually as born to be witnesses for Christ—ordained to the office of diffusing the

gospel. Wherever they went, the language of Christ was still sounding in their ears—"Ye are my witnesses—go into all the world." Is it true that he has said this to us? To the ear of piety he is saying it still—to the eye of piety, he is here this day to repeat it—do you not behold him? Do you not hear him saying it to you—and to you? Never, till Christians feel themselves thus individually addressed, will the church fulfil its lofty design, as a missionary witness for Christ to the world.

2. A second requisite for this end is wisdom—wisdom to mark the characteristic features of the age, and the movements of the world—to appreciate the peculiar position of the church in relation to them, and to apprehend and obey the indications of God concerning them. Never was there an age when the wide field of human misery was so accurately measured, and so fully explored, as the present; and, consequently, there never was a time when the obligation of the Christian church to bring out all its divine resources and remedies, was so binding and so great. Never was there an age when science attempted so much, and promised so largely—challenging the gospel, in effect, to run with it a race of philanthropy; and, consequently, never was there a time when it so much concerned the church to vindicate her character as the true angel of mercy to the world; and to shew that not by might, nor by power, but by the Spirit of God, the wounds of the world must be healed. Never was there a time when the elements of universal society exhibited so much restlessness and change—when the ancient superstitions exhibited so many signs of dotage and approaching death—when the field of the world was so extensively broken up, and ready for cultivation; broken up, not by the ordinary ploughshare of human instrumentality, but by strange convulsions from beneath, and by bolts from an invisible hand above; and, consequently, never was there a time which so loudly called on the Christian sower to go forth and sow. And never was there a land blessed with such peculiar facilities as Britain, for acting as a witness for Christ to the world. Why is it that the gospel is at this time in trust with a people whose ships cover the seas—who are the merchants of the world? Has he who drew the boundaries of Judea with his own finger—who selected the precise spot for the temple—who did everything for the Jewish church with design—abandoned the Christian church to accident? And, if not—if he has placed the gospel here with design—what can the nature of that design be, but that it should be borne to the world on the wings of every wind that blows? Say, why is it that Britain, and her religious ally, America, should divide the seas—should hold the keys of the world? Oh, were we but awake to the designs of God, and to our own responsibility, we should hear him say, "I have put you in possession of the seas: put the world in possession of my gospel." And every ship we sent out would be a missionary church—like the ark of the deluge, a floating testimony for God, and bearing in its bosom the seeds of a new creation. Christians, ours is, indeed, a post of responsibility and of honour! On us have accumulated all the advantages of the past; and on us lies the great stress of the present. The world is waiting, breathless, on our movements; the voice of all heaven is urging us on. Oh, for celestial wisdom, to act in harmony with the high appointments of Providence—to seize the crisis which has come for blessing the world!

3. A third requisite is Christian union. It is in vain to talk of the beneficial rivalry of sects. This only shews that we are so much accustomed to our divisions, that we are beginning to see

beauty in that which forms our deformity and disgrace. It is in vain to say that good is done, notwithstanding our want of union. Is not the good which is effected abroad, effected by merging the disputes of home—in fact, by uniting? And would not a knowledge of our differences there be fatal to our usefulness? But the doctrine of Christ on the subject is decisive—"that they all may be one, that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." In other words, the visible union of Christians is essential to the conversion of the world. It is in vain to say that but little disagreement exists, as yet, among the Christian witnesses abroad, the seeds of discord only ask for time, and they will not fail to bear their proper fruit. But why have not the witnesses abroad differed? If they are right, must we not be wrong? And how is it that even we, on occasions like the present, can quit our denominational camps, and proclaim the truce of God? Both owing to the same means—by paying greater deference to the will of Christ than to the claims of party—by looking out on a world perishing—by erecting the cross for its salvation, and rallying around it—in a word, by reverting practically to the design of the church. Oh! who is not ready to say, at such times, "Would that the whole church could be converted into a Christian Missionary Society, and meet in that capacity alone." The union wanted is not the union of one day in a year, but the union of every day—not merely a oneness of purpose, but, as far as practicable, a union of means for the attainment of that purpose. Here is one society calling aloud for agents, and pledging itself to raise the funds for their support; while another proclaims that it has agents ready, if it did but possess the means of sending them forth. Now, the spirit we need is that which, on the first hearing of a statement like this, should induce the parties to sympathize in each other's wants, and, by uniting their respective means, to supply them. Brethren, the same obligation which binds the church to act as a witness for God at all, binds it to do so in the best manner, and to the full amount of its resources. While division is making that which is already little, still less—not only would a spirit of union, by combining our resources, economize and increase them, but, by evincing a greater concern for the will of Christ than for the success of party, it would invite it—it would humbly challenge his blessing, for it would be a substantial fulfilment of his prayer.

4. And is not greater liberality wanted? Not that which waits for public excitement—that which gives, not a little from much, but much from a little—that which brightens into cheerfulness, and rises into prayer, as it casts its gift into the treasury, saying, "May this be a witness for Christ." The liberality wanted is that which shall constrain the wealthy Christian to ascend that altar himself, taking with him all he has, and offering the whole as a missionary oblation to God. Talk not of sacrifice; do you forget that the world has been redeemed by sacrifice—do you remember the nature of that sacrifice? Oh, if you really know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, let the church but sympathize with Christ in the travail of his soul; such acts of self-devotion would become of frequent occurrence, and new songs would burst forth in heaven.

5. The history of the church would justify, and its present position demands, an increase of energy and zeal. I say this, not so much in relation to our missionaries as to our churches. He must be ignorant, indeed, who does not know that rashness often passes for zeal, and that the path of wisdom lies between a blind impetuosity on the one hand, and a cold, calculating policy on the other.