

design before they are uttered, anticipates wants before they arise, and provides against dangers before they threaten. Was it necessary, for instance, that he should first distinctly legislate on the subject? "Go," said he—and he was standing but one step from the throne of heaven—"Go into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." Still, plain as this command might at first appear, the duty which it enjoins is so novel, and the project which it contemplates so vast, that doubts are likely to arise as to its import and obligation; he repeats it, therefore, again and again—repeats it in other forms, as an old prediction that must be fulfilled, and as a new promise; "Then opened he their understandings, that they might understand the scriptures, and said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And ye are witnesses of these things." But particular qualifications will be necessary: "Ye shall receive power from on high," said he, "after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you; and ye shall be witnesses unto me, both in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth." But peculiar dangers will assail them: "All power is mine," said he; "go, and you shall move under the shield of Omnipotence; for I am with you always, even to the end of the world." Thus, making the most comprehensive provision, and taking the whole responsibility of success on himself, his last word to his witnesses was, "Go"—his last act was to bless and dismiss them to their work—and the last impression he left on their minds was, that his church was to be essentially missionary, or aggressive.

And as this was the last indication of his will on earth, you know how his first act in heaven corresponded with it. Let the scenes of Pentecost attest. The eternal Spirit himself came down—came expressly to testify of Christ—came to be the great missionary spirit of the church, to "convince the world of sin." You know how the witnesses began at Jerusalem, when three thousand souls received their testimony. You know how their hesitation to quit Jerusalem and Judea was gradually overcome—how a Paul was added, like a new missionary element infused into their spirit—and you can conceive how they must have felt, in the terms of his new commission to be witnesses to the Gentiles, as if their own original commission had been renewed and reinforced. You know how they were divinely allured farther and farther from Jerusalem—how vision after vision drew them on to invade the neighbouring territories of idolatry—and how, at length, when even a Paul evinced a reluctance to pass the last limit of Jewish restriction—when even he scrupled to leave the confines of Asia—you know how a vision was seen far back in the western regions of idolatry—the emblem of Europe—in the person of the Macedonian suppliant, saying, "Come over and help us." Bursting that last enclosure, the uttermost circle of restriction, he was not disobedient to the heavenly vision; and the church found itself fully committed to its lofty office of traversing the world.

But was there no danger lest the church should yet, under the influence of its old attachments, cast back a lingering look to Judea, lest it should debase and localise religion by regarding Jerusalem as its rallying point, and the temple as its home? Judaea, and the place where for ages it had dwelt, are forthwith swept away; henceforth but two parties are to be left on the earth—the missionary witnessing church of Christ, and the listening world. Thus Judaea, which had been the goal of the old religion, the resting-place after its wanderings, now become the starting-point of the Christian church, for the race of the world. The old economy had expected the world to be missionary, and to send to it. The new economy requires the church to be missionary, and to send to the world. And if the waiting and stationary character of that church had been emblematically represented by the bending cherubim on the mercy-seat, the new missionary church was henceforth to be represented by another mighty angel, flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to every nation and kindred, and tongue, and people, that dwell on the earth.

And now, we might have thought, the Saviour

has surely made it sufficiently apparent that his people are to be his witnesses to the world. Nothing more can be necessary to shew that this great object enters into the very design and principle of the church. But not so thought the Saviour himself. Once more does he come forth and reiterate the truth. When we might have supposed that his voice would be heard no more—once again does he come forth, and break the silence of the church; and the subject on which he speaks is the missionary character of his church. Not that his church had lost sight of its office. His witnesses were carrying their testimony in all directions. But as if the angel having the everlasting gospel did not yet speed on his way fast enough to satisfy the yearnings of infinite compassion, or as if he feared that angel would stop ere the whole earth, the last creature, had heard the gospel testimony—he came forth personally, and announced—"The Spirit and the bride say, Come; and let him that heareth say, Come; and let him that is athirst, come; and whosoever will, let him come, and take of the water of life freely." Oh! where is the tongue that can do justice to the boundless benevolence of this final declaration of Christ. What is the comparison which can adequately illustrate it? Picture to your minds a large company of travellers, destitute of water, while crossing one of the vast deserts of the east. For days previous they have had barely sufficient to moisten their parched lips; but now their stock is quite exhausted. Onwards they toil for a time, in the hope of finding a refreshing spring. But the unclouded sun above, and the burning sands beneath, render some of them unable to proceed—they lie down, never to rise again. The rest agree to separate, and to take different directions, in the hope of multiplying their chances of discovering water. After long wandering in this almost forlorn pursuit, one of them finds himself on the margin of a stream. Sinking his enraged thirst, he immediately thinks of his fellow-travellers. Looking around, and perceiving one in the distance, he lifts up his voice, and shouts to him, with all his returning strength, to come. He communicates the reviving signal to another still further off, and he to a third, till the very extremities of the desert ring with the cheering call to come.

Brethren, that desert is the moral waste of the world; those perishing travellers, perishing by millions, are our fellow-men; that living spring is the redemption of Christ; the first that drank of it was his church: that church, every member of it, directly or indirectly, is to lift up his voice to the world, with the divine invitation to come—while the Spirit of Christ, speaking through them, gives the call effect. Every one that hears the call is to transmit it further still, till it has reached the very last of human kind, and the world echoes with the welcome sound.

Brethren, such is the scripture theory of the Christian church. Its members are witnesses for Christ to the world. Every place to which their instrumentality reaches is meant to be a centre for extending it to a point further still. Every individual added to it is meant to be an additional agent for propagating the sound of salvation onwards, till a chain of living voices has been carried around the globe, and from pole to pole, and the earth grows vocal with the voice of the church witnessing for Christ.

II.

Now, if the design of the Christian church be essentially that of a missionary witness, we may expect to find that every page of its history illustrates and corroborates this truth. No law of nature can be obeyed without advantage to him who obeys it; nor violated, without avenging itself, and vindicating its authority. The same is true of the laws of the Christian church. And, accordingly, we find—secondly, that in every age it has prospered or declined just in proportion as it has fulfilled or neglected this primary law of its constitution. This might be demonstrated by an induction of the great facts of its history. But on an occasion like the present, we must confine ourselves to general remarks.

And here, need I remind you, that the period of its first, its greatest activity, was the season of its greatest prosperity?—that it expanded without the aid of any of man's favourite instrumentality—learning, eloquence, wealth, or arms?—that it achieved its triumphs in the face of it all?—that though Persecution ten times kindled her fires,

the blood of the church ten times put them out?—that it saw some of its bitterest foes become its champions and martyrs, and new territories constantly added to its domains?—that its progress from place to place was marked by the fall of idol temples—the banners of the cross floated over the thrones of idolatry—and God caused it to triumph in every place? And why all this, but because the church was acting, in character, answering its end, fulfilling its office, as the witness of Christ to the world?

Oh! had we witnessed the activity of its first days—had we heard only of its early history, and triumphant progress from land to land—how naturally might we ask, "How long was the church in completing a universal conquest?—At what precise period did India embrace the faith of Christ?—How long was it before China was evangelised?—Was there no year of jubilee on earth, when the gospel had been preached to the last of the species; and in what year did it occur? Alas! for the church, that these inquiries should sound so strange! and alas, for the world! and alas, too, that the most striking historical illustrations of the design of the church should be those drawn from its neglect of that design!

Need I remind you that the cessation of its activity was the cessation of its prosperity? From the moment the church lost sight of its appropriate character, it began to lose ground to the world. Its members, instead of witnessing for God, began to bear false witness against each other. When it ought to have been the almoner of God to the world, it became the great extortioner, absorbing the wealth of the nations. When it ought to have been the centre whence radiated the light of life, it was the focus, drawing to itself the learning and the vain philosophy of heathenism. When it ought to have been the birth-place of souls, it was the grave of piety—so that, in order to live, it was necessary to leave it. When its members should have been the peacemakers of the world, it was a camp—the great school of war. When it should have been checking political ambition, it has been used as the great engine of states. When it should have been furnishing martyrs to the world, it has itself been a great martyrdom, in which to witness for God was to burn. And the strength of the church, which should have been all put forth in aggressive efforts, has been wasted in the strife of internal discords.

What was the history of the Christian church—what has been the history of any branch of that church, when it has once lost its essential aggressive character, but the closing scenes of Judaism enacted over again? What do we see, in such a case, but the spirit of piety displaced by the spirit of discord? Scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees—the proud, persecuting, and worldly, among its members? The great doctrines of grace supplanted by outward forms? What do we see but the Son of God rejected, betrayed for money, deserted by his professed disciples, delivered into the hands of his enemies, receiving the mockery of homage, crucified afresh, and put to an open shame? What, then, do we see in that church but fearful signs of approaching judgments? till, at length, when it ought to have been vanquishing the world—the world, like the Roman army, advances, besieges, and destroys the church.

But as every departure of the church from its aggressive design is sure to be avenged, so every return to that character has been divinely acknowledged and blessed. Had we no facts at hand to prove this, the calls which our Lord gave to the seven Asiatic churches to repeat their first works, and his promises of prosperity if they did so, would lead us to infer it; the uniformity of the divine procedure would warrant us to expect it; the very return itself, implying, as it would, a divine influence, would itself be a proof of it. But facts are at hand. The history of every protestant Christian church in Britain, during the last fifty years, demonstrates, that every return to spiritual activity is, in so far, a return to divine prosperity. Ascertain the measure of holy activity and devotedness in any church, and you have ascertained the measure of its internal prosperity. So that a person might, at any time, safely say, "Tell me which branch of the Christian church is the most naturally active and aggressive in its spirit, and I will tell you which is the most prosperous."

And the reason of this is sufficiently obvious. The planet is then moving in its appointed orbit, the church is then moving in a line with the pur-