

Divine Ownership—Human Stewardship.

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Were this not a Christian audience, my initial duty would be to conciliate the prejudices kindled by the mere announcement of my subject: "Divine Ownership—Human Stewardship." Ultra-individualism is singularly regnant today. Most strenuously do men continue to insist upon individual rights. The revolutionary appeals of Tassalle, and the radical claims of other colorless or crimson-dyed socialists, breaking in upon the grinding monotony of the depressed and well-nigh lifeless masses, with all the magic sweetness of a nativity chant, have quickened a response in many a hitherto dormant soul, a response, that with a few we regret to say, has ripened into utter repudiation of all forms of constituted authority, but with all into the stout assertion of man's rights as an individual. Even God's claims have been forgotten. Too many have fellowshipped with the absurd extreme of Feuerbach who exclaimed, "God was my first thought, Reason my second, Man my third—and last."

In defending the inalienable rights of the individual, man has been deified and God's unquestionable claims have been ruled out of court. In their natural condition men sorely chafe under every announcement of serfdom, even though it be God's voice reminding them of the yoke that is easy and of the burden that is light. But, Christian friends, it is not thus with us: With our rights as the children of God, we have come to recognize his claims as the Father of men. We at least are not prejudiced. I may proceed at once to talk of Divine Ownership.

The kingdom of divine ownership extends to every moral being. Wherever man exists, there may we behold the divine scriptre. The purport of Christ's sagacious reply—"Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's," seems to be that wherever God's image is embossed, there abides the inherent title to God's possession. Wherever there is the image of moral freedom and conscious personality, wherever the superscription of moral obligation imposed by conscience, there should the rights of God's absolute ownership be respected. And this image is upon every man. Adam bore it. He was a steward, and not a possessor. Stewardship has been his legacy to all his seed. No man owneth himself. He is the property of God. With the price of creation and sustenance he has bought us. Consistent with this fact I might indulge in an exhortation to the effect that every member of this audience "glorify God in his body." Such an exhortation would have upon it the sanction of Scripture, but not, however, the sanction of this occasion. As Christians we bear upon us more than the image of Adam's creation. We have the superscription of the second Adam who redeemed us. We are God's possession, not simply because he created us, but more especially because he recreated us in Christ Jesus. The price transcending all others with which we have been bought into the number of God's possession, is the Lamb of Redeeming Love. "Bought back not with corruptible things, as silver and gold . . . but with precious blood, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot, even the blood of Christ." Why use a blunt sword when a sharp one is at hand? Why prefer a strained to a strong bow? I prefer to resort to the higher motive rather than the lower, to the stronger rather than the weaker. To recognize vividly whose we are and whom we ought to serve, let us look not to Eden but to Gethsamene, let us remember not merely that we were born, but that we were born again; not merely that we have been sustained in body, but more especially that the empty cisterns of the soul have been replenished by the streams of satisfying grace.

Considered independently upon the basis of its intrinsic importance, as well as comparatively with other Scriptural facts, the New Testament has surprisingly little to say concerning the divine ownership of the Christian. Christ's contribution to this theme is limited to the claims couched within the titles by which he designated his followers, viz. bondsmen and disciples. To these claims Paul adds the bold assertion, "Ye are not your own, for ye were bought with a price," and the blunt interrogation, "Know ye not that to whom ye present yourselves as servants unto obedience, his servants ye are whom ye obey?"

In explanation of this paucity of argument and assertion with reasonable probability, we may attribute Christ's silence to the fact, that as yet Calvary had not become a historical fact. The love of Christ, with climatic grandeur, had not manifested itself in expiatory sacrifice. Jesus did not, in explicit terms, draw men unto him as their owner, simply because as yet he had not been "lifted up." Christ plainly told his followers that he had many things to say unto them that they could not bear, without the comfort and enlightenment that streamed from his cross. Was this not one of the "many things?" When his death had become a vivid

scene in the retrospect of the disciples, then could they understand that they were not their own. Hence he deferred the explicit declaration of this truth, committing it to the spirit who subsequently spoke through Paul. But why were Paul's words so few? With such a constraining scene before his eyes as Christ expiring on Calvary, why did he not say more? Pause a moment. With such a scene how could he say more? Love is a strange logician. She reaches her conclusions, not by premise but by inference. When the soul is aflame with emotion, rational conclusions are stated as if they were intuitions. Emotions stifle utterance. Paul's emotions were stirred to their depths. With characteristic intensity he was peculiarly impressed with Christ's love. In his untiring service, and in his sublime optimism he sees the prevailing love of God. And that he should dispense with argument, introducing bare conclusions is perfectly natural. On the wings of aspiration, caught up into the heavens of ecstasy he has no time for explanation. The best he can do is exclaim, "Know ye not that ye are not your own?" Dear hearers if we, in imitation of Paul, could apprehend more of God's love, it would not be necessary to argue ourselves to the conclusion of God's ownership and its accompanying responsibilities. Nay; these would be fundamental facts. Divine ownership would be a first principle in Christian life, and human stewardship an incontrovertible inference. What we need today is not more logic to argue out our duties, but rather more love to enforce our obligations. Argument inclines toward compromise, love toward implicit obedience. In questions relating to obedience, first rather than second thoughts are best; and first thoughts, be it remembered, are the impulses of a loving heart.

But while the New Testament has comparatively little to say concerning the divine ownership of the churches, I would not leave the impression that there is any uncertainty upon this point. There is not. What is lacking in quantity is compensated for in a few positive assertions that allow no questionings whatever. In writing to the Romans, Paul declares that "having been made free from sin we have become servants of God"—literally bondservants of God. According to the institution of bondservice, the slave was the fixture of the soil. When the land changed owners, the slave had a new master. He had no abode, no task, no time that was strictly his own. He had rights, but only those of property. The Christian has become God's bondservant. He is a slave doing God's work. However harsh this may sound, there is no evading of the fact that it is the truth.

Paul, moreover, is not alone in using this harsh word. Jesus Christ resorts to the same rigid term. There are two great words denoting service *Pais* and *Danlas*. The former derived from the loving relations of the home, where child obeys parent, allows more latitude than does the latter. It is very remarkable that upon every occasion where service is considered Jesus uses the harsh term, *Danlas*, rather than the loving word *Pais*. This fact is more striking when I add that Jesus as a servant is, without a single exception, designated *Pais* rather than *Danlas*. The Christian as a servant, is never granted the latitude of a *Pais*, while Christ, filling the same capacity, is never restricted to the limitations of bondservice. Dear friends, do we err when, in this sentimental, shilly-shally age, we emphasize that the Christian is not his own? I think not. I am well aware of the fact that Jesus has called us his "friends," but it is rather significant that subsequent to the giving of all these names, Paul and Peter never declare themselves to be the "friends" of Jesus Christ, but always his "bondservants."

I now direct your attention to a more agreeable truth. That God owns us may sound unpleasant, but in very truth, this fact opens wide the door to magnificent possibility. The character of the possessor largely determines the beauty and bounty of the possession: Egypt of today is vastly different from Egypt of a year ago, not because her resources have been enriched in any material respect, but because her possessors—or to be very accurate, her protectorate have changed. Lives, that under the control of men, are given to wanton prodigality and profligacy, in the hands of God are transformed into channels of immortal good. God sees all our possibilities. No gold deposits of human ability are allowed to lie in seclusion, but in the hour of need are unlocked and placed upon the mart of service. The Christ that looking upon Peter, looked through him and gave him the name, Cephas, so singularly suggestive of the disciple's latent possibilities, that Christ looking into the innermost recesses of our hearts, places in our hands the stone with the new engraving, and sends us forth to a discipline calculated to develop, and to a sphere calculated to utilize our resources of mind and heart and treasure.

But my contention is challenged by the sceptic, who reminds me of the abundant failure—so characteristic of Christian life. We must admit that possibilities in believers' lives are not being realized despite the fact that the Omnipotent, Omniscient God is owner. By means of illustration let me attempt an explanation. Sometime ago while driving, I had occasion to notice rather care-

fully, a dilapidated farm residence. The fences were broken, the lawn was a meadow, the barn was a wind-swept skeleton, and the house was most uninviting. No school-boy ever passed that way without smashing a window-pane. It was the target of a life-time. Not long after my first observation of this home I was agreeably surprised to see an entire change. The lawn was smiling with flowers, and the home presented every appearance of domestic comfort. Upon inquiry I learned that this residence had been mortgaged and that its foreclosure had been legal for some time. With the considerate leniency of the mortgagee the mortgagor had struggled hard to redeem himself. But in vain. After weary hours and heart aches, after glimmerings of hope obscured by added reverses he had evacuated this scene of struggle. The rightful owner had then entered and beautified his property. There is a spiritual parallelism in these facts. God has a mortgage on all our lives, a mortgage that has long expired. With pride of heart we are struggling on. Everything is a shack. Some of us, however, have given up the struggle and all is an Eden. Dear friends, it is not a question of ownership; God owns us, admit or deny it as we choose. It is a question of occupancy. In the interests of our success as stewards would that we would move out and let God in. Let us cease the desperate struggling and let the Christ come in. He will beautify the ruins and develop the latent resources. If you will let him in, my friend, I repeat these important words. God never forecloses a mortgage or enters by forced possession. We have wills upon which God does not encroach. "Our wills are ours," and until they become His they arrest His purpose. At the door of the heart that Christ owns, he stands waiting for the soul's welcome. Wondrous spectacle. Unite them and divine ownership blossoms into a beautiful possession.

We have reached the second phase of my subject, "Human Stewardship." It is the volitional element in human possessions that make us stewards as well as bondservants. Were we devoid of volitional freedom we would be bondservants, and bondservants only. Inasmuch as we have the willing faculty the Master has gone away committing to our care his own treasures. He has granted us the latitude of a steward because the time is coming when, as moral beings, we shall have to render an account of all his trust to us.

To some he has given five talents, to others two, but to all one. The more numerous the entrusted talents the more onerous is the responsibility. While desiring the best gifts let us remember the accompanying obligation. In Retsch's illustrations of Faust there is a scene in which demons are attempting to drag Faust into the pit of destruction. With eager eyes and bated breath angels from above witness the mad struggle, and plucking robes from Eden's bowers fling them down upon the heads of their fiendish foes. As these robes fall, passing into the sulphurous atmosphere of the pit, they are transformed into burning souls that, descending upon the demons, scorch and blister and torture. God's blessings, though they leave the skies as roses, falling upon the disobedient and ungrateful may become blighting curses. The flowers of opportunity may become the coals of condemnation. In very truth "the first may be last."

If, however, God has given five talents to some and two to others, I would emphasize that he has bestowed a single talent upon everyone. No one has been slighted, not even in the apparently partial distribution of the talents. God has given to each according to his several ability. The measure of God's endowment is conditioned by man's investive ability. If one steward receives a small amount while another is the recipient of much, it is because the former cannot, with proportionate returns, invest so much as can the latter. Considering our several ability the inequality of divine endowment is another expression of God's fatherly consideration. What would be our predicament were we held responsible for five talents when the investment of two was the limit of our ability! Let us look at both sides of the problem of distribution. If there is inequality there is also the consideration of a God who is love. If God is partial it is not in his giving to one more than to another, but in his creating one with abilities to use more than can another.

God gives everyone as much as he can invest. Up to this point all is clear. But why one can invest more than his neighbor is a mystery, part of the mystery of creation, inscrutable in the last analysis, but rendered bearable when we believe that God is love, and recognize that we are mere clay in the hands of a Sovereign Potter.

Go then, Christian, deal seriously with what God has given you. If you have many talents you have grave responsibility, if only one you have as much as you can invest. Do not depreciate your abilities. Believe me, more of the world's failure accrues to the tendency of underestimating the one talent—the possession of the many—than to that of overestimating the five talents—the endowment of the few. The disastrous crime of today is not false pride but false humility. Significant is it that the unprofitable servant was he that had the one talent, and yet true to life, for this steward is peculiarly liable to underestimate and consequently misuse what God has given him. If Paul has said, "Let