

THE SEVENTEENTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY.

After devotional services the Rev. John Laing, D.D., delivered the following discourse:—

But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ.

Wherefore he saith, when he ascended upon high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men.—Ephesians iv. 7, 8.

Without question the Psalm which we have just sung (Psalm lxxviii.) is the Scripture referred to in the text. There the ascent on high, the taking captive of many, the receiving of gifts, are declared to be in order that "Jehovah God may dwell among men," even among those who had been rebels and enemies. This is God's grand purpose of love to sinful men.

For the welfare of man communion with God is indispensable. Man was made "to glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever." To enjoy Him—God Himself. Apart from God bliss is impossible. Innocent man enjoyed the privilege of communion until it was interrupted by sin. Then man was severed from the life of God; he died. To restore the lost fellowship, to give life to dead sinners, "to make an end of sin and bring in everlasting righteousness," is the declared object of God's great salvation, "that Jehovah God may dwell among the redeemed."

This high purpose of restoration was made known symbolically at first in the cherubim, to which the sinful outcasts from Eden might repair to meet with God, and cherish the hope that in God's good time the flaming sword which kept the way of life would be by grace removed, and that they might again walk with God in Paradise restored. Afterwards God made Himself known as present with holy men. Enoch walked with God; Noah also communed with Him; Abraham was his friend; Jacob met with Him at Bethel and saw His face at Peniel; Moses spake with God face to face; and the Shechinah in the Holy of Holies, in tabernacle and temple, was the visible token that God dwelt among His people. "Jehovah Shammah," the Lord was there.

In the fulness of time the symbols faded away before the glorious reality. Men beheld the glory of the Only-Begotten of the Father, Immanuel, God with us. The eternal Word became flesh and dwelt among us. And still, though now ascended and enthroned at the right hand of the Majesty on high, Jesus the Christ, by His indwelling spirit, makes His abode with men, as He said, "If any man love Me he will keep My Word, and My Father will love him and we will come unto him and make our abode with him." Thus the bodies of Christians become God's temples, and He dwells in them. This, however, is but the earnest of the blessed consummation, when a great voice out of the throne shall be heard saying, "Behold the tabernacle of God is with men, and He shall dwell with them, and they shall be His peoples, and God Himself shall be with them and be their God." For this revelation of the sons of God, we who have the first fruits are waiting; waiting for the new heavens and new earth, the new Jerusalem "where there shall be no more curse, but the Lord God and the Lamb shall be therein, and His servants shall do Him service, and they shall see His face and His name shall be on their foreheads." Then shall God forever dwell with redeemed men.

To accomplish His purpose God has prepared an instrument. The body on earth of which Christ is the Head is that instrument. To it, His Church, the work is intrusted, and power from on high is given to perform it. This Church is God's elect, chosen and called out of the world, separated for the Lord, created anew in Christ Jesus unto good works which God hath before prepared that they should walk therein. In all ages God had His witnesses doing His work of mercy. Abel and Noah, Abraham and Melchisedec, Job and Elihu; as well as Moses and Solomon, or Samuel and Elijah, or John the Baptist and Paul, each in his time and place was raised up to lead men back to God. Let us not narrow God's Church or ignore the work of saints of old. The Christian Church is the Old Testament Church made perfect; and the Church militant of our day is one with the Church triumphant in glory. All who in every place call upon the Lord, all who profess the true religion, constitute God's Church, His chosen instrument for the restoring of fallen man to fellowship with God.

To equip her for this great work the Church is furnished with gifts by her ascended Head. Note it well, not once for all, eighteen hundred years ago were these gifts bestowed; they are continuously imparted. Christ did not leave us orphans or charge His Church without His gracious aid to develop her gifts and evolve new powers in after ages according to the devices of His Father. On the contrary, the Paraclete abides with the Church forever. In every succeeding age that Spirit works in a glorious diversity of gifts, dividing to each severally as He will. Each individual Christian receives his peculiar gift directly from the Lord, and is kept dependent day by day on spiritual grace vouchsafed. These gifts or charisms are fully treated of, specially in three passages of Scripture, viz., Romans xii. 1-9; 1 Cor. chap. xii., and Ephesians iv. 1-9. We may not consider them in detail, but it is well to note some characteristics of these gifts.

Sixteen such gifts are enumerated, viz.: Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Pastors and Teachers, Healing, Ministry or Helps, Rulers or Governments, Wisdom and Knowledge, Faith, Tongues, Interpretation of Tongues, Miracles or Powers, Exhortation, Discerning of Spirits, Wealth, or Giving, and Mercy. Some of these may be extraordinary and temporary, but others are ordinary and permanent; some have reference to the spiritual and others to the temporal affairs of the Church, but all are bestowed by the one Spirit.

These gifts are received from Christ our ascended Lord. We desire to emphasize this truth. These spiritual endowments are not the outcome of man's nature, necessarily evolved by unconscious adaptation to its environment; they are directly and constantly supplied from age to age, from hour to hour, by the Spirit of Christ as He wills. For these gifted men the Church is ever dependent on Him.

Further, such men are raised up "for the perfecting of the saints, unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ"; whatsoever men so gifted are, whatsoever they possess, they are, and possess for edification. Precious gifts, needful gifts they are, by which the Church is enriched, and which the Church should use. The Church may indeed exist where these gifts are not recognized, are allowed to lie dormant, not exercised, or where they are perverted and abused. Not all of them or even any one of them in particular is necessary to the being of the Church; but the possession and exercise of them are necessary to its well-being. Though they have in times past been often neglected and misused, or left unimproved, nevertheless God has not withdrawn His grace. Whatever gifts are needed are still vouchsafed and will be, provided the Church is faithful to her trust. Our ascended Lord is still bestowing His gifts.

How clearly does the history of the Old Testament Church illustrate this abiding care of God over His people. When the time had come to redeem the seed of Abraham out of bondage, Moses was raised up, endowed with wisdom and learning, experienced in administration of public affairs and with the needful knowledge of desert life. Then came Joshua, the captain of the Lord's host who never met defeat. When first the tabernacle, and at a later time the temple, were to be built, Bezaleel and Aholiab and Hiram were there to do the work, men "filled with the Spirit of God; in wisdom and in knowledge and in all manner of workmanship to devise cunning work"; many wise-hearted men and women also there were to render needful service. Men also were raised up who possessed large means and with princely liberality consecrated their wealth to God's

service. I Jews for government received the Spirit; and judges and prophets and kings and priests through all the ages appeared at every important juncture of affairs specially qualified to guide, direct, comfort and edify God's people who waited for His salvation.

Nor has that care abated now when men worship in spirit and in truth without type or symbol. In every age and land God raises up, and by the energy of the indwelling Spirit of Grace, qualifies them for their work in the upbuilding of His spiritual temple, ever keeping them and the Church directly dependent on Himself.

The twelve apostles, specially inspired and endowed with miraculous gifts, gave their personal testimony to the Christ of God and laid the foundations of the Christian Church in many lands, sealing their testimony with their blood. A noble company of martyrs succeeded them, going forth to disciple the nations, baptizing and teaching, even as Christ charged the twelve. "Not lords over God's heritage," not priests to come between God and man, but zealous missionaries—that is, apostles or sent ones—for eighteen hundred years they have been preaching Christ and founding Churches far off among the heathen.

Prophets have lifted the solemn voice of warning, or summoned to repentance, or delivered messages of comfort as God commissioned them. Evangelists, men of impassioned eloquence, "sons of exhortation," have passed through many lands proclaiming the Gospel with power, rousing the masses and awakening God's people to a higher life. Pastors and teachers have with painstaking care instructed enquirers, opened up the Scriptures, fed the flock, gathered the lambs, comforted the afflicted, the poor and the feeble, refuted false doctrine and unfolded the riches of Gospel truth. Miraculous gifts of healing may have ceased, but not the least of the gifts bestowed are men and women full of human sympathy and skilful to relieve the suffering and to heal diseases. Men qualified to render all manner of service in temporal affairs have given their labours—too often without thanks or recognition—and thus ensured prosperity for the Church. Governments, that is men of wisdom and discretion, with the faculties of organization and administration, have by wise counsels and patient management advanced the best interests of society. Magistrates, judges, lawyers, legislators, statesmen, have been raised up, who fear God and promote righteousness. Scholars, philosophers, men of science, poets, artists, musicians, have dedicated their gifts to the glory of God. Faith has inspired with hope and energy and achieved most noble triumphs for the cause of Christ in the world. Men of wealth have laid munificent gifts on God's altar; endowing seats of learning, hospitals, asylums and such like institutions, and defraying by liberal devices the expenses of the Church in the Lord's work. Men of learning have scattered knowledge freely among the nations and enabled all of every land and tongue to hear and read of the wonderful works of God in their own language. But why need I go further? These and others such are the gracious gifts of our ascended Lord, through whom His work has been carried on now for eighteen centuries, at times with marked success and at other times amid difficulties and great discouragements.

While we thus gratefully acknowledge what God has done, we must with sorrow confess that too often gifted men have utilized their God-given talents for selfish ends, and have gained by them a tyrannical supremacy in the name of religion, with the sad result of obstructing enquiry, stifling free thought and repressing energy. In Protestant Churches also individual liberty has been lost in selfishness. The possessors of God's gifts have forgotten the privilege of service, and used their talents for self-aggrandizement. They have, with worldly ambition, sought the first places of honour, aimed at wealth, emolument, power, and ceased to serve God in His Church. Gifts of eloquence, learning, science, skill, teaching, the art of healing, the fine arts, have all come to be regarded for their money value, and to be rated according as they procure worldly success; "talent will always command its price." Ignoring the responsibility which the possession of such gifts entails, with the all but universal approval of professing Christians, God's gifts have been prostituted to the procuring of wealth and the enjoyment of luxurious ease. And with the abuse of the gifts to the loss and shame of God's Church, danger threatens Christendom, a sense of injustice and resentment has risen among the neglected poor, a distrust of religion and opposition to the cause of Christ. In the most highly civilized and nominally Christian countries the heartless selfishness of talented men who bear the name of Christ, and their pitiless competition in business and commerce, have alienated those who come behind in the race for riches and pleasure from the religion of Christ, as if the Gospel were inadequate to meet the wants of the present age. Let us hope that the growlings of discontent and the muttered curses which we hear from time to time may lead Christians to see the error into which the Church has fallen, and to return to a faithful use of the gifts of our ascended Lord for the edification of His body and the salvation of men. Of this return we see many hopeful presages, and give thanks for the revived interest which is being manifested in all the Churches and the efforts that are being put forth to bring the blessings of the Gospel, both temporal and spiritual, within the reach of sinful, suffering men around it.

It is by Foreign Mission work especially that for the last fifty years God has been showing the Church her negligence in the past, and has been calling her to faith and effort. How does it gladden the heart of God's people to hear of, to read of, to see the noble men and women endowed with faith and apostolic zeal, learned, eloquent, with high scientific attainments, skilful, acquainted with the useful and the fine arts, trained physicians and nurses, teachers, far-seeing, wise and prudent, who have consecrated their talents to the Lord and have gone forth among the degraded races and civilized oriental peoples to disciple the nations through a preached Gospel. How hopeful also is the prospect when at home so many goodly companies, societies and Churches have gratefully acknowledged these missionary gifts as gifts from the Lord, and are putting forth efforts to maintain and aid them in the Lord's work. Particularly encouraging of late years has it been to behold men and women possessed of large means, realizing that they are but stewards for the Lord's work, devising liberal projects, consecrating their wealth, and giving largely for the cause of Christ both at home and abroad. And the Master has abundantly blessed the labours and gifts of His believing people. Success in the ingathering of myriads, in the establishment of native Churches, in the elevation of communities, in the spread of God's truth revealed and of useful knowledge, has been graciously vouchsafed. "The Lord has done great things for us, whereof we are glad." From the distant isles of the sea, where erewhile barbaric cruelty, moral pollution and gross intellectual darkness reigned, now are heard songs of deliverance raised by ransomed hosts. Yea, missionaries and funds are going forth from many such places in a way that puts to shame the labours and givings of lands long blessed with the knowledge of Christ. Among the teeming multitudes of India, China, Japan, yea, even in darkest Africa, heroic martyrs and labourers have established centres of light and blessing, and the way throughout the whole world has been prepared for the coming day when, by the instrumentality of the Church, faithfully using the gifts of her ascended Head, truth, righteousness and love shall prevail, the kingdom of grace shall be universally established, the Prince of Peace shall take to Him His great power and reign; when the welcome shout shall be heard with great voices from Heaven saying: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and His Christ; and He shall reign for ever and ever."

Faithful and brethren, in view of all this; of all that God has done and is doing in, for, by His people; of the many doors that lie open awaiting the coming of those that "bring good tidings of good, that publish peace and salvation"; of the loud calls that reach us from north, south, east and west to go over and help, to rescue the

perishing; in view of all these things, what should we do? What the great need of God's Church to fit her for the glorious work which the twentieth century, now so near (happy they that see), calls her to? What in particular does this Church, in which Christ has given us the privilege of bearing office, demand of us? Ah, these are practical questions; they are solemn questions. On the answer they receive much depends, both for ourselves and our fellowmen. Great is the responsibility of all the Churches to-day; not the least the responsibility of the Presbyterian Church in Canada. Much freely we have received, much is justly required of us. Think of the profusion of gifts Christ has bestowed: Christian liberty, education, learning, science, literary facilities, wealth, professional ability, skilled labour, able statesmen and financiers, superabundant material prosperity. Think of the magnificent opportunities we have for serving the Lord and advancing His Kingdom. What the fathers and brethren, shall we do? Let us consecrate ourselves and wholly to the Lord, all we are, all we possess. Let each one of us earnestly bend to the work allotted to us by the Master in a little corner of space and our short minute of time, and thus far our portion of God's eternal work and will—"Here, Lord, I give myself away, 'tis all that I can do."

In order to this one thing mainly—I might say only—we need with it all else will come, while without it all else will be in vain one thing we need, a fresh baptism of the Holy Spirit—a baptism—living fire, a Pentecostal experience. Let us then wait on the Lord till we receive the promise of the Father, and are endowed with power from on high. "Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord." "Except the Lord build the house, the labour is in vain that build it."

Once more let the divine socialism, the communism of the which the Holy Spirit works, be realized; and men of all classes and conditions, beholding God's work, will wonder and say, as old, "See how these Christians love each other." The reproach of selfishness, covetousness, luxurious indulgence, will be taken away; fear will come on every soul; all that believe will be together as work together; the true unity of God's Church will be manifested in the bond of peace. Being of one heart and one soul, no one will say that aught he possesses is his own. Christians will hold all things in common as a trust for the good of their fellowmen and will rejoice in each other's gifts; not only possessions and money, but gifts bestowed by Christ—learning, wisdom, arts, eloquence, the professions, the trades, financial ability, and all else consecrated to God, will be devoted to the good of man; selfishness will be melted before the warmth of Christian love; holiness to the Lord will be inscribed even on the bells of the horses, and God will dwell among redeemed men.

Changes great and many will take place in the coming age. The Church will adapt herself to the new conditions of the future, as in past times she has conformed to the demands, opinions and customs of the people who receive the Gospel; Christian wisdom requires this. The Church cannot remain stereotyped in every feature; a fossil remnant among the living activities of the human race. There must be progress, improvement, adaptations in many outward circumstances, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence. But it is not to these external things that we turn with confident hope. Not in magnificent places of worship, with costly services and refined and cultured liturgies; not in grand ecclesiastical organizations, new orders, revived guilds, societies, and associations, not in new methods, far less in new doctrines, revised creeds, or accommodations to the tastes and opinions of worldly-wise men with fond devices and will-worship; not in such things is our hope placed. Oh, no; for us the "old, old story of Jesus and His love" is enough. "He is the same yesterday, to-day and forever." His Gospel is and ever will be, and it alone, the power of God unto salvation. We are not ashamed of it. The Word of God is the sword of the Spirit, which alone can slay the enemy of the natural heart and give light to the dark soul. An uplifted—crucified and ascended Saviour—alone can draw men heavenward. The loving energy of godly men and women is the appointed instrumentality for accomplishing God's great work of salvation. Oh, then, let everyone on whom the ascended Christ has conferred a gift, use it, not for self-aggrandizement but for the Lord's glory, let Christians generally recognize, without envy or jealousy, these God-bestowed gifts, and support and encourage the possessors of them in the performance of the Lord's work. Let us help the men of faith, the men of power, whom the Lord is raising up to devise and execute great things for the good of men, and if we cannot do the work ourselves, let us contribute, through others, our little share towards the triumphant consummation.

Fathers and brethren, when I speak of the members of God's Church, I wish to be understood in no narrow, sectarian sense. I speak of "all who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity," however they differ from me in creed or ecclesiastical usages and practices. Every true Christian is under obligation at all times and in all relations to own Christ's authority and act as a member of that glorious body, of which He is the Head. Not as a Church member only, and in the house of God, but as a citizen in his field, his workshop, his office, his store, his home; in the chambers of justice and legislative halls, in the management of financial concerns and commerce and trade, when doing business quite as much as when engaged in religious exercises, to acknowledge and serve the Lord Christ, and regulate his conduct accordingly. He is at all times "a temple of God through the spirit." He is not at liberty to lay aside the eternal principles of truth and righteousness at the call of worldly expediency or carnal policy; he may not, at the demand of supposed political interests, or the pitiless competition of trade and commerce, forget the law of God, and deceive or wrong his fellow man. A Christian's work should be worship. His time, his talents, possessions, bodily members, as well as his soul, are the Lord's; redeemed by Christ, he is His, and in all relations, at all times, in all work, he ought to glorify God in his body and spirit, which are the Lord's.

Our hope, then, is not in huge organizations or fine ecclesiastical machinery; it is in the individual Christian—in men and women filled with love to God and guided by His good spirit, in men and women of prayer and honest effort, faithfully doing God's will in lowly dwellings, unknown to fame, it may be, but instruments honoured by God in doing His work. When all Christians, high and low, learned and ignorant, in city and in country, rich and poor, thus address themselves to God's work, the coming of the day of the Lord will be hastened, more and more rapid and wide-spread will be the advance of the kingdom, Christ's enemies will be put under His footstool, and Immanuel, with His saints, will rule the world. Even the last assault of organized anti-Christian rebellion will be overthrown, the man of sin "will be slain with the breath of His mouth, and brought to nought by the manifestation of His presence," a ransomed world will receive its descending Lord, the perfected Church will be presented faultless: old things shall pass away, the new heavens and new earth, in which dwelleth righteousness, shall appear. Then shall the great voice out of the throne be heard saying, "Behold the tabernacle of God is with men, and He shall dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be with them and be their God, and He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and death shall be no more; neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more. The first things are passed away."

A large audience assembled in the beautiful structure recently erected for the congregation of St. Andrew's Church, Kingston. It is certain that had not the train bearing the remains of the dead Premier and its company of mourners to the city at the time of meeting, the attendance would have been still larger. The Premier