

The Beacon.

THEY RECEIVED THE WORD WITH ALL READINESS OF MIND, AND SEARCHED THE SCRIPTURES DAILY, WHETHER THOSE THINGS WERE SO.—ACTS XVII. 11.

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DECISION FOR CHRIST! "Lord, I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest." Luke 9: 37. Thy path is not where earth's glories shine...

SERMON BEFORE THE CHURCH MISSIONARY SOCIETY. Preached in the year 1841.

BY THE REV. FRANCIS CLOSE, OF CHELTHAM. I CORINTHIANS, i. 21.

After that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.

The mighty aggressive movement of the Church of God upon the dark masses of Heathenism, in these last days, is beginning to attract universal attention.

And when we would obtain a satisfactory answer to this question, to what test shall we have recourse?—in what balances shall we weigh it? Various opinions are entertained upon this subject; and many of them very erroneous.

Turn we, then, to primitive Christianity. This is not only the most simple, the most sure and certain, but it is the only authoritative guide in this matter.

This, then, shall be my present attempt—in simple dependence upon HIM, whose prerogative it is to bring strength out of weakness, and wisdom out of folly, and to impart salvation by the foolishness of preaching!

In the words of the text, the Apostle presents a complete epitome of the first promulgation of Christianity.

I. Let us consider the TESTIMONY HERE AFFORDED US RESPECTING THE FIRST PROMULGATION OF THE GOSPEL.—After that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.

I. Hear, then, the witness of Revelation, respecting the state of the Heathen World as it was in the days of the Apostle;—they knew not God! Nor is it unimportant that we should recollect the period of history when this testimony was recorded.

wild Indian's hut, that these words were inscribed; but on the polished marbles of Athens and on the walls of proud, imperial Rome.

"Vain wisdom all, and false philosophy!" Nor was this merely coincidence: it was CAUSALITY. The language of my text, the testimony of all Scripture, and the evidence of universal History, substantiate this remarkable fact: viz. that unscientific wisdom and intellectual cultivation have been the fruitful parents of idolatry and infidelity.

In the proudest cities of the world, the wealthiest, the most highly cultivated, the most scientific, there have ever been found the most abominable idolatries, with their attendant licentiousness and infidelity—evils which Philosophy has itself promoted. So the Apostle declares, "The world by wisdom knew not God; or as the original imports, "by means of wisdom."

It is, the world's ignorance of God emanated from wisdom itself!—a testimony borne, not only against that particular age, but against all preceding ages. The phraseology of the text implies long anterior retrospection: After that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God. After thousands of years had rolled by, St. Paul—looking back to Egypt, where Science was born and cradled—to Egypt, with its innumerable reptile gods—to Babylon, where Science was nourished and matured, and whither the Grecian Sages went to light their lamps; contemplating these ancient fountains of philosophy, no less than its wide flowing streams in times more recent—the inspired man traces all the spiritual blindness and ignorance of the world to the pride of its secular philosophy, and declares that the world by wisdom knew not God!

With regard to Babylon more particularly—that gay, luxurious city, who thought to be a lady for ever—the prophet Isaiah—chap. xlvii.—after having described the gross licentiousness and degrading idolatry which prevailed, records this testimony of God against her:—Thou hast trusted in thy wickedness: thou hast said, None seeth me. Thy wisdom and thy knowledge, it hath perverted thee; and thou hast said in thine heart, I am, and none else beside me. Hence all the abominations of Babylon are traced to its wisdom, and to the inflated pride of its philosophy.

Exactly parallel is the conclusion at which St. Paul arrives, in another Epistle—Romans i.—where he gives a complete and succinct account of the origin of Heathenism; affirming, that they became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools;—and thence sprung their idolatry; for he adds, And they changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things. In like manner, he teaches the Corinthians that this carnal knowledge, this secular philosophy, binds, rather than promotes, the growth of true religion—1 Cor. iii. 18. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool that he may be wise. He must unlearn his knowledge; he must retrace his steps; he must humble the pride of his philosophy and wisdom.

Except ye be converted, and become as little children, said our Blessed Lord, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.—This, then, is the testimony of God respecting the heathen world at that period, and antecedently.

But even more than this is implied in the text;—the Gentiles not only knew not God, but they were in a perishing condition—they were lost! This is evident, from an expression in the close of the verse before us: It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. Had they not been lost, they would not have stood in need of salvation by faith in Christ.

together, from the ordinary instruction of pastors in the Church of Christ: it is not so much the doctrine, the explication, the instruction in righteousness, as it is the first promulgation of the Truth to those who never heard it. It pleased God by the proclamation of His heralds, or by the evangelical declarations of His Missionaries, to save them that believe. Preaching is a summons from the God of heaven and earth, to His rebel children, to lay down their arms. It is the proclamation of the lawful Sovereign; it is the offer of free pardon and mercy from the King of kings and Lord of lords.

This peculiarity of preaching is strongly marked in verse 17. When St. Paul says, Christ sent me, not to baptize, but to preach the Gospel, he would not lead us to suppose for a moment that he depreciated the sacred ordinance of baptism; but, that the administration of that sacrament formed no part of the herald's office, to which he felt himself more particularly called. His first and highest duty was, to publish his message—to proclaim mercy and salvation to a guilty world—to call upon the rebels to lay down their arms;—and when they had submitted and obeyed, when they had repented and believed, then he would cause them to be baptized, and to be signed with the sign of the cross, the emblem and seal of the faith into which they had been baptized. The same appointed order is observed in the original commission of all Apostles and Ministers: Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature—baptizing them:—first preach, and then baptize. Preaching is the converting ordinance; baptism the seal and ratification of conversion. Preaching, in this sense, is for unbelievers: the Sacraments are for the edification and sanctification of believers.

Nor must the substance of this preaching be overlooked. This proclamation—this message of mercy—may all be comprised in one word; it is—CHRIST. Christ, the first; Christ, the last; Christ, the alpha and omega, the beginning and the ending. When the Apostles first stole from house to house among the inhabitants of Jerusalem, what did they preach? They taught and preached Jesus Christ. When Philip went down to Samaria, what message did he deliver? he preached Christ unto them! When Paul was apprehended, and was suffered to address the people at the top of the stairs, he testified of Jesus, who met him in the way. On Mars' Hill, to the polished Athenians, he preached Jesus, and the Resurrection; and his uniform determination was to know nothing among the Gentiles, save Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Salvation, full, free, complete, offered, without money and without price, to guilty, lost, and ruined man—this is preaching—this is the proclamation of the grace of God. To exhibit Christ, in all the glories of His person, as God manifest in the flesh, as Immanuel, God with us; in all the sufficiency of His offices, as the Prophet, Priest, Advocate, and King of His people; in all the riches of His grace, pardoning the vilest sinners, receiving the far-away prodigal again to His bosom, sanctifying and building up His elect people—this is to preach the Gospel: he that preacheth Christ, preacheth the Gospel; and he that doth not set forth Christ, preacheth not the Gospel.

One great peculiarity, however, in that preaching which pleased God, and which He has appointed for the salvation of the world, yet remains to be noticed: It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. It is evident, from the context, that St. Paul uses this expression in two senses. Preaching was foolishness to some who heard it;—to the self-righteous Jews and the philosophic Greeks, the cross of Christ was foolishness; and to those alone who believed, was it the power of God unto salvation, according to the assertion of the eighteenth verse, The preaching of the cross is, to them that perish, foolishness.—But this is by no means the principal, nor the most obvious and striking interpretation of this phrase. By the foolishness of preaching, the Apostle chiefly intended the simplicity of preaching—undorned, and undisguised by human wisdom and philosophy. He says, in verse 17: Christ sent me, not to baptize, but to preach the Gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect. And again, in the twenty-fifth verse, The foolishness of God is wiser than man; and the weakness of God is stronger than men. It is evident here, that he is contrasting the simplicity and apparent feebleness of the office of preaching with the profound wisdom of man; proving, that the foolishness of God is wiser than men. In like manner, in the second chapter, he declares further: And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom; declaring unto you the testimony of God. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling: And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power; that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. We learn from these various passages, that it is possible not only to preach the Gospel at all, but even so to preach Christ and His Gospel, that we strip them of their power. It is not preaching alone that will save souls, but the foolishness of preaching—the simplicity of it. Conceal it in the tangled web of human sophistry; garnish it with the flowers of human eloquence; obscure it with the dusky mantle of antiquity, present it in a lordly dish—and what do you? You destroy its hidden power! You make the cross of Christ of none effect! You may attract the eye of man from the precious and lovely pearl, to the gorgeous stones in which it is set: you divert the mind from the jewel, to the casket

which contains it! The Gospel so preached, gives an uncertain sound, and none will prepare themselves to the battle. It is only simple, plain, affectionate, Scriptural declarations of God's Truth, unreserved, full, and free, flowing from the heart, and spoken in the power and demonstration of the Spirit—it is only such preaching as this, that can save them that believe. This is God's remedy. This is that, which the Apostle declares was the salvation of the heathen world. It was not pompous shows, nor complicated ceremonies nor empty forms: it was not the elevation of the Host, nor the sounding of sweet music, nor those things which delight the carnal senses of man: it was not these which subdued the world to Christ; but it was before the simplicity of God's Truth that the proud Dagon of heathen superstition bowed, and sunk, and fell down! And in the course of years, the still small voice of this blessed Gospel won its way from heart to heart, like the trickling brook through the pebbles of the valley, until it fell into the wide ocean of God's mercy, and the civilized heathen world became Christian.

3. This leads me to consider THE RESULT WHICH FOLLOVED FROM THE APPLICATION OF THIS BLESSED REMEDY TO THE HEATHEN WORLD.

In no part of the original commission of our Lord to His Disciples, nor in any of the writings of His Apostles subsequently, can I find any intimation that all the world would believe, and be saved. From the very wording of the first divine commission, a different conclusion might be expected:—Go ye into all the world, said our Lord, and preach the Gospel to every creature. But will every creature receive it?—He adds: He that believeth and is baptized, shall be saved: but he that believeth not, shall be damned. And this is the nature of the Gospel dispensation to the end of time: for he adds, Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Thus it hath been from the beginning until now; and for any thing we can see to the contrary, so it will be. Exactly in accordance with this view is the language of the Apostle in my text: It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save—WHOM? ALL THE WORLD? EVERY CREATURE? NO—THEM ONLY THAT BELIEVE. An attentive perusal of the beautiful Gospel history, as detailed in the Acts of the Apostles, will lead inevitably to the conclusion that the first promulgation of Christianity proceeded far more slowly than is generally supposed. The descriptions we meet with in the writings of some persons, would lead us to imagine that an Apostle had but to appear in a heathen city, and all the gods bowed down before him, and every man immediately acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah. But, so far from this, the history records, that in some cities he was persecuted, and persecuted; in others, he was beaten with stripes; he scattered his seed in different places, here a little, and there a little: here certain men cleave unto him—there some of them believe: Lydia a seller of purple, or a Roman jailor: two or three, or a household:—and at best, what is it? It came to pass, that some believed, and some believed not; or, it is related, that as many as were ordained to eternal life, believed. Such is the description of the first promulgation of Christianity afforded us in the Acts of the Apostles. The Truth was not embraced immediately by every one who heard it; but many years were occupied in its publication; and nearly three centuries elapsed before the civilized world became Christian. And we have reason to be cautious, lest we come to hasty conclusions respecting the results of the modern attempt to diffuse Christianity, through a mistaken estimate of the original and Apostolic Mission.

But there is one characteristic of these results which demands our attention. In all cases, the Gospel saved them that believed:—upon this important truth the mind should dwell. Look at the converts; whether they were of Jewry, or of Corinth, or of Athens, or the barbarous people at Melita; wherever it might be, the effect which followed the preaching of the Gospel was the same:—As many as received Him to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. In the second chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians, and indeed throughout the whole of the New Testament, we meet with beautiful descriptions of the moral change which took place in the converts: They passed from death unto life—from darkness to light—from the power of Satan unto God. Such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of our Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God. Men as fierce as lions, became as gentle as lambs; men as ferocious men became kind; licentious men pure; impious men devout. These—these were the effects, which uniformly followed in them that believed! This was the result, which the Apostle described: After that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe—to save them with an everlasting and complete salvation—to deliver them from the curse and burden, from the practice and dominion of sin—to set their hearts at liberty; so that, like the lame man in the Temple, they walked, and leaped, and praised God.

But this subject would be incomplete, if we did not notice the important declaration of the Apostle, that all these things were by the wisdom of God. This expression must be referred to the whole passage—to the wisdom and to the foolishness, to the ignorance and the illumination. It was in the deep wisdom of God, that He permitted the heathen world to grope at noon-day as in thick darkness: it was in His

profound wisdom that the light of Truth was confined for 2000 years to the little land of Canaan, and to the narrow tribes of Israel; and thus man was left to struggle with the omnipotency of his own knowledge, wisdom, and philosophy; that it might be made clear, in earth and heaven, and in hell, that man never yet of himself found out God—that man, when he once has lost the knowledge of the True God, never in any instance finds it, except by a new revelation from heaven. All this was by the permission of God—The times of this ignorance, God winked at: but the foolishness of preaching was the direct ordinance of God: and both alike proclaim His wisdom: for this foolishness of preaching, this doctrine of grace, this salvation of thousands, was drawn out of the profound wisdom, as well as out of the tender love and good pleasure of our God.

Thus have we contemplated the words of the text as an epitome of the early promulgation of Christianity; exhibiting alike the state of the then world, the remedy provided for them, and the results which followed.

AGAINST PREVAILING ERRORS.

THE LORD BISHOP OF WORCESTER. (H. PEPYS, D. D.)

"Give not needless offence to the laity. I am far from recommending any improper compromise with the vices, the follies, or even the prejudices of your people. Preach the word of God fearlessly, nor ever allow the shame of man to prevent you from performing your important functions, through evil report and good report; but such a conscientious discharge of your duties, as the ministers of Christ, is perfectly consistent with the exercise of a due discretion in things indifferent. Thus if certain forms, which may or may not be sanctioned by the practice of primitive antiquity, but which have certainly fallen into disuse for the last two hundred years, convey to the minds of the laity the impression of a tendency towards the formality of the Romish service, it would be most unwise, especially without the authority of his discretion, for any young minister to attempt their revival. It is a trite observation, that no quality of the human mind is more rare than that of common sense; and certainly we have never had so much cause to make it, as when we have seen churches deserted, and consequently the means of usefulness in a minister entirely destroyed, because he would persist, in opposition to the expressed wishes of his congregation, in performing certain forms, which, however in themselves indifferent, give offence to them. Things in themselves indifferent, cease to be so when the adoption of them creates a suspicious feeling in the minds of those committed to our charge, and induces upon us an unwillingness, for any young minister to attempt their revival. 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