

## OUR CONTRIBUTORS.

### THE PROMISE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT'S TEACHING.

SERMON PREACHED AT OPENING OF SYNOD OF HAMILTON AND LONDON, AT BRANTFORD, APRIL 11TH, 1881, BY GEORGE BRILL, D.D. WALKERTON, ONT.

"When He, the Spirit of Truth is come, He will guide you into all truth."—John xvi. 13.

God has instituted His Church in the world to be a witness for Himself, a depository for His truth, and to furnish the ordinary instrumentality which He will use for the salvation of men. As such, amid the decadence of the ages of history, the rise and fall of human institutions, and the changes incident to the natural progress of the human race, it remains ever one and the same—the same, that is, as God's great agent for the evangelization of the world, and fundamentally, as the depository of the truth, but of course, in its outward circumstances, varying with the changes of time. Under God's universal law of evolution, that Church, while remaining the same in its divine life and perpetual mission, has exhibited changes in form or dispensation, according to the degree of the revelation of Himself to man, which God gave as the ages rolled on. In the simple worship of the patriarchs, God the Father was adored, with but slight reference to the Son and the Spirit. In the gorgeous symbolic ritual of the Mosaic institutions we have the great work of the Son, as Redeemer, unfolded, and in the line of inspired prophets, ending with the mission of the God man Himself—we have the principle of the dispensation in which divine communications were made to man.

At the time when the words of the text were spoken, the Church was about to enter on a new period of its existence, and on a new and vastly extended sphere of work. With the ascension of Christ the dispensation of prophets was to come to an end, and that of the Spirit was to commence. The full revelation of the Trinity was now made, by the revealed function of the Holy Ghost as the special possession of the Church for the future, consequently pointing to high spirituality as its special characteristic. The man, Christ Jesus, in his ministry as the great prophet, was about to withdraw his personal presence from his Church, but his divine presence was not to be withdrawn. The promise, "Lo, I am with you always," was to be fulfilled by the Holy Spirit as His agent in an everywhere and ever present power of a divine life. In many forms the promise of the Spirit was repeated. In the text it comes to us as a Church court, with particular adaptation to our necessities.

I. *The Church's source of spiritual life.*—The Church, from its very nature and position must be both divine and human. From the nature of its formation, the purpose of its existence, and the constitution by which it is administered it must be a divine institution, if it is of any value. But it is equally true that that divine institution is embodied in human form, and that while conforming to its divine law, it must be conducted on the common-sense principles of human business. It is to be feared that often men, relying on the divine ideal of the Church, fail to apply to it the principles of business thrift, care and good management which they know to be necessary in conducting their own worldly business, to the great loss of the Church of that prosperity which it might otherwise have. The Church needs all the prudence, tact, and business habits and capacity of its best members to be given to its administration, together with the best machinery which can be devised. Yet it is easy to see that these alone will not be enough. The best machinery is of little value without motive power. This power must in the Church be an indwelling life, always attainable for constant use, omnipotent, so as to be always capable of effecting the work to be done, spiritual, so as to be adapted to act directly on the human spirit, and loving, as the power is not physical but moral, operating on the emotions and the will. All these requirements are fully and perfectly provided for in the Church, in the present dispensation of the Spirit, a human form, indwelt by a divine power of life. As the human body and spirit act and react on each other, and the higher functions of the spirit are affected by the state of the body, weakened by disease, and sometimes suppressed altogether, so it is possible that the mere ideal of the Church as a divine institution will not save it from deficiency, weakness or

death, if its human embodiment becomes diseased, weak or dead. Properly to fulfil its functions then, the Church of Christ needs to have a sound, healthy human form, indwelt by the ever present Spirit of the living God. We often meet with discussions as to the relative value of the doctrinal and the ethical in religion, but both are necessary, and something more too. To both must be added the living power of the Spirit of God.

"Ye shall receive power," was the parting promise of our divine Head. Do we then, as representing a part of His Church, realize our need of that power, and the way in which it is to be obtained? Do we ask our Heavenly Father for this blessed gift, do we cherish that gift as bestowed, and do we ever seek for its greater fulness? We are a part of that host to whom the great commission has been given. The work is vast in its extent, and unparalleled in its requirements. To banish every form of idolatry and superstition from the world, to set up the religion of Jesus everywhere, to rescue man from the degradation of sin, to cleanse him from its pollution, to enlighten the darkened mind, to sanctify the unholy heart, to subdue the rebellious will, and to impart a new spiritual life to those who are dead in sin, all this is a work entirely beyond mere human power and skill, and which certainly can never be effected without the infinite power of God. But it is equally true that according to God's present plan of administration it can never be effected without man's highest powers being consecrated to this work, and concurrently employed with God working in us. In dealing with the eternal realities of the Gospel, God calls for the consecration of men to serve in the teaching and ruling of His Church. In this, learning, eloquence, natural gifts, careful culture and training are included, and all to be sought for and used for this purpose, but along with these it is essential that they be accompanied with the fire of the Holy Spirit, coming into hearts so prepared, and so making these things to be mighty. Let us ever seek for a renewed and fresh baptism of the Spirit, as necessary now as in the days of the apostles, and as available to us as to them. To a superficial observer the miraculous powers conveyed on the day of Pentecost will appear superior to the unseen powers by which the graces of the Spirit grow; but this is a mistaken view, the perpetual gifts and graces of the divine life are far above any mere temporary miraculous powers.

II. *Interpretation of the Word.*—The Spirit of truth comes to lead us into all truth. The Bible as a mere book is the same to all readers. In its words and sentences, in its grammatical construction, in its history, biography, poetry, song, didactic and ethical lessons, it has a value for all. But above all these, it has a value immensely higher for some. To those whose hearts are under the power of the Spirit of truth as a teacher, its pages beam with a divine light, its words are words of eternal life; and to the diligent searcher it is an inexhaustible mine of truth. To one it is a human book, to another it is God's revelation of Himself to His lost child. The promise of the text indicates the mode in which the Bible is to attain its highest value for us. We need to submit ourselves to the guidance of our heavenly teacher, that He may cause His Word to dwell in us richly in all wisdom. As the Word is the instrument by which men are to be sanctified, the particular part of the Spirit's work mentioned in the text, becomes practically very important.

Here we may refer to the legislative power possessed by the Church, the source of its authority, and the limits within which it must be used. The Bible is God's written law; the charter of the Church's liberties, the source of its powers, and the standard of its teachings. Before the authority of that law it holds a position analogous to that of a corporation, in view of the Royal Charter or Act of Parliament which gave it existence. Such a corporation has certain powers of enacting by-laws, and rules for its conduct and for better effecting the purposes of its existence, but in no case can it contravene its charter. So with the Church. It has full power to enact all the legislation necessary for its government, under the supreme authority of its Head, and for the fulfilment of its functions, always within the enactments of its great charter. In so doing, it is apparent that in the wide-reaching nature of some of the questions which come before Church courts, in the perplexing difficulties which may surround them, and in the important consequences which human wisdom cannot foresee, there are

causes which may make the apparently wisest legislation defective or even a complete failure. Hence the need of a higher wisdom than our own, and the text points out the source where it is to be obtained. With the text before us, there is no presumption in our expecting the guidance needed, if sought for in a right manner. We do not expect any magical power to supersede our own judgment, and by turning us into mere machines, to compel us to do only what is right. But if the Church is really God's instrumentality, as we fully believe, and if the promise of the text is a reliable one, as we also fully believe, then we certainly have a right to look for, and expect to receive, a real teaching and guidance in the legislative and executive functions of the house of God. Let us be humble and teachable, remembering our own weakness and ignorance; let us be prayerful and dependent in spirit, and then, let us confidently expect the presence of the Holy Ghost in our deliberations.

III. The text furnishes the explanation of progress in the Church. Christianity is adapted to man's nature, to influence and combine with all in it excepting sin, and to sanctify all to God's service. Men differ much both in the nature and strength of their faculties; no two men are exactly alike, either physically, mentally or morally. This is in accordance with God's laws in all departments of His administration—in all, unity of plan, with manifold diversity of evolution. So in the Christian life, the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God, is evolved in the widely diversified fields of Christian experience and exhibition of the life of God in all the wide variety of human character.

The fact that the Church conforms to God's universal law of progress raises some questions respecting creeds and confessions, their true place, and whether they fetter the growth which is essential to life in the Church. There are extreme views, on which we need not dwell. Some cry out against all creeds and confessions, and advocate their utter abolition. It will on examination usually be found that such persons have a creed of their own, though not a written one, and that of the most narrow and intolerant kind. Some dignify themselves by the title of free thinkers—an extraordinary use of language—when the so-called free thinking consists in an utter abnegation of their highest powers of mind to bondage of the spirit of evil; or if not going so far, giving up the glorious liberty of God's children for bondage to a de-based philosophy, unsupported by either physical or mental science. Apart from these classes are others, very different, but with whom our present subject has a closer connection. On one hand are Christians who regard creeds as being largely obsolete, and to be dropped as the relics of an imperfect past. On the other hand are Christians who venerate creeds so highly as practically to put them on a level with the written Word of God. In the wide field of opinion embraced between these extremes, there arise controversies, some of which, conducted in a good spirit, will lead to enlarged views of truth, but some of which controversies result in evil, unsettling the minds of some, and grieving the spirit of others. One class are eager for a change of the existing formularies by renewal or revision. Others—earnest Christians who see no need for change—are troubled with terrible fears, as if the very foundations of our belief were in imminent danger of being swept away. Most assuredly both these classes are under an entire misapprehension of the real question at issue. Careful consideration will shew that the proposals of the one are untenable, and that the fears of the other are groundless.

Let us glance for a moment at the history of creeds. The early Christian Church grew by the rapid ingathering of men of all races, nations, forms of religion, and degrees of culture, with copies of the Bible scarce, and means of teaching imperfect; hence short formularies of doctrine became indispensable. The pure truths of the Gospel, imperfectly understood, would unavoidably become tinged by the wild and varied views of theosophy, psychology and philosophy, which could not have been at once banished either from the Jewish or Gentile mind, even if the means of instruction had been better than they were. Hence the embodiment of the distinctive doctrines of Christianity in short formularies, and these added to from time to time, as each new evolution of the action of truth on the theosophy referred to rendered necessary, to obtain an available means for instructing the new converts, as also to enable the old ones to set forth