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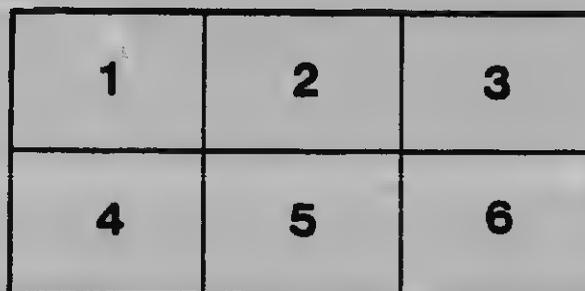
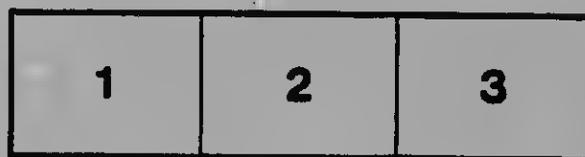
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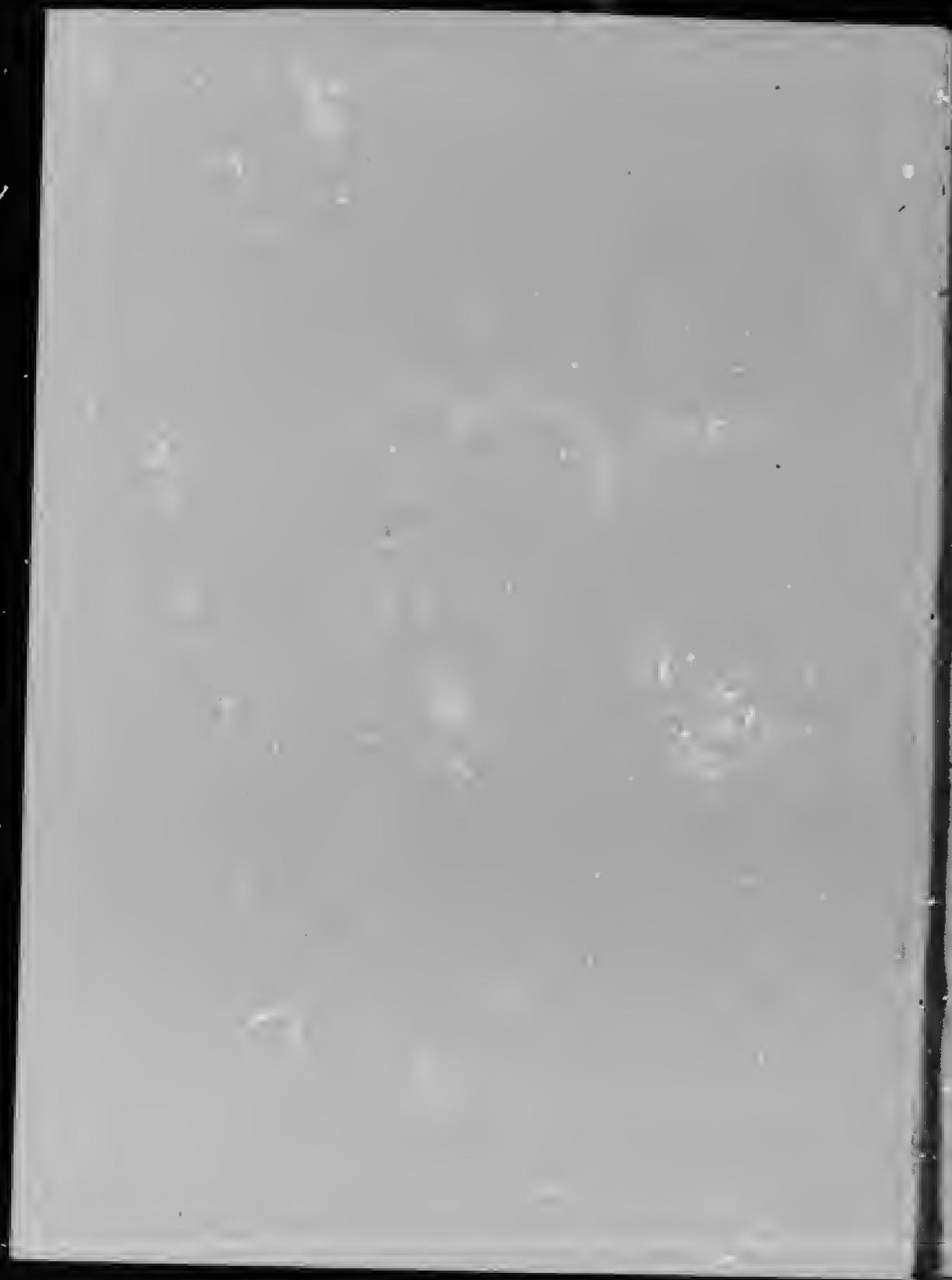
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The Variable and the Permanent

IN THE

Evidences of Our Faith.

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A SERMON

*Preached in Bloor Street Presbyterian Church, on  
Sabbath, 7th June, 1903,*

BY

WILLIAM MACLAREN,

*Professor of Systematic Theology,  
Knox College, Toronto.*

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#### PREFATORY NOTE.

The following discourse was preached in the Bloor Street Presbyterian Church, on Sabbath, June 7th, in connection with services commemorative of the completion of fifty years in the preacher's ministry. My ordination took place on June 1, 1853, at Amherstburg, Ontario. When the jubilee of that event approached, the Presbytery of Toronto, the Alumni of Knox College, the Board and Senate of Knox College, and the congregation of Bloor Street Church, with which I have been connected since its inception in 1886, made it the occasion of the expression of their kind feelings for me and my work, at meetings held on Friday, May 29th, and by services on Sabbath, May 31st. The kindness expressed in word and deed by so many friends was deeply gratifying, and cannot soon be forgotten. On the following Sabbath these special services were closed by a sermon which I had been asked to preach.

This discourse was not prepared with a view to its publication, but at the suggestion of some friends, I have decided to print it. It has been to some extent revised, but the train of thought is unchanged. In giving it to the press, I desire it to remain as a memento of commemorative services which have greatly touched me, and those nearest to me. I hope also that the line of thought followed may, as my friends believe, prove useful to my readers.

*TORONTO, June 22nd, 1903.*

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2 Peter 1: 16.—“For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eye witnesses of His majesty.”

WHEN Peter wrote these words he was an old man, and saw his end approaching. Whether he expected the crown of martyrdom, which he afterwards received, or looked for death in the ordinary course of nature, may be uncertain. But that he was looking for it in some form is evident from his statement that the Lord Jesus had showed him that he must shortly put off this tabernacle.—Verse 14.

For more than fifty years I have been engaged in preaching the gospel, and in training others to preach it; and it seems suitable that I should embrace this opportunity of stating to you some of the grounds that assure me that in accepting the gospel for myself, and in proclaiming it to others, I have not been following cunningly devised fables. The grounds are many, and I can only touch on some of them.

Many of you may have seen, on the sea-shore, lighthouses with different kinds of lights. In some the lights appear to wax feebler and disappear. Then they reappear and grow strong and bright. In others they shine with a steady lustre all the night. These lights may illustrate, or suggest, three kinds of evidences for the gospel system to which I may refer. There are evidences which seem to grow weaker with the lapse of time, or, at least, are more difficult to master; evidences equally clear in all ages;

and evidences which, with the lapse of time, wax clearer and stronger.

1. *Evidences which, with the lapse of time seem to grow weaker, or at least become more difficult to master.*

Let us make two suppositions. Imagine, if you please, that you had lived in the days of Christ, and had yourselves observed His life and seen His mighty works, as these are set forth in the gospels. You had yourselves seen "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers cleansed, and the dead raised up." In these circumstances, you could scarcely fail to feel, as Nicodemus did, when he said: "No man can do these miracles that Thou doest, except God be with him."

Or, imagine again, that you had lived a little later, and had listened merely to the personal testimony of those who were eye-witnesses of the facts narrated in the gospels. When you listened to these men of manifest sincerity and integrity, some of whom had been personal companions of our Lord, and heard them tell what they knew of His teaching, life, and works, you could scarcely fail to be impressed by the force of such testimony. They described to you the spotless character of One they had known intimately, and informed you how He had been apprehended, and led out to Calvary and crucified. They had seen the Roman soldier's spear plunged into His side, until water and blood gushed out. They had seen Him taken down from the cross and laid in the sepulchre. They declared that they had seen Him alive on the third day, and that He had appeared to them on many occasions during forty days. They affirmed that He had conversed familiarly with them, and had eaten and drunk in their presence. Now suppose that this testimony was given

with the air of sobriety and truth, I do not think that any sane, unbiased mind could fail to be impressed by it.

But these suppositions manifestly do not fit your case in the present day. You were not yourselves eye witnesses of the life, the death, and resurrection of Christ. You were not with Him, like Peter, "on the holy mount," and you did not hear the voice which came to Him from the excellent glory: "This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased."

You have not even heard the personal testimony of those who declared that they had seen His wondrous life on earth, and had been eye witnesses of His majesty. The accent of truth in a witness, on which the judge lays so much stress, has never, except as it can be traced in writings, fallen under your observation.

We are nearly nineteen centuries removed from these alleged facts, and can only get at them by the study of an extensive literature and history. It must, we think, be evident to everyone that the further we are from the events, the longer the line of witnesses we must examine, and the wider the range of literature we must canvass to ascertain the truth. If this line of evidence does not grow weaker as the centuries roll on, it certainly demands from us greater research and study to master it.

All this must be, and should be, freely acknowledged; for nothing is gained by shutting our eyes to the truth; still we cannot admit that this line of evidence should ever be regarded as weak by thoughtful men.

Look at the matter for a moment. The death and resurrection of Christ are the central truths on which Christianity depends. So Paul judged, as we see from his preaching: "For I delivered unto you first of all, that

which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures; and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day, according to the Scriptures."—1 Cor. 15: 3, 4. According to his estimate, Christianity was bound up with these facts. And it seems to me that if Christ died and rose again, as the New Testament asserts, the gospel rests on an immovable foundation.

How then does the matter stand? There are no other facts of ancient history, however surely believed, which are attested by such evidence as sustains these pillars of the gospel system. The record of Christ's life comes to us from four contemporary historians, two of them personal companions of our Lord during His public ministry, and the other two contemporaries, who made it their business to ascertain the facts while the events were fresh in the memory of Christ's disciples, and of the nation. Indeed, all the writers of the New Testament bear witness to these facts; for they all assume, or assert, the death and resurrection of Christ.

There could be no better witnesses of these facts than the early disciples of Christ. They knew Him during His life. They had seen Him put to death, and they had seen Him alive after His death. They could not be mistaken. We venture to think that no explanation of their witness is so simple and natural, as that they wrote what they knew and testified what they had seen.

Shall we say, with some, that these early disciples, in their grief, were so carried away with some kind of hallucination that they, honestly enough, came to believe that what they wished had taken place, and that Christ was indeed risen from the dead? But these men, in a

state bordering on insanity, did not only persuade themselves of the resurrection of their Master, but in Jerusalem, where the facts were known, they made converts by thousands to the belief that Christ is indeed risen from the dead. Can any supposition be more violent? Then look at their writings, how will they harmonize with this notion? No books surely were ever penned more marked by sobriety and common-sense.

Shall we, with others, imagine that these men banded themselves together to impose a known fraud on the world? What had they to gain by it? They exposed themselves to reproach, persecution, and death itself, rather than deny the resurrection of Christ. It is indeed believed that only one of the twelve escaped a violent death, and yet they knew that a denial of the resurrection of Christ would have brought them, at any time, freedom from persecution. Then look at their writings. In them the morality of the world has touched its highest water-mark. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Surely no one capable of a moral judgment can believe that such writings are the product of wilful imposters!

But it may be said, these men are long since dead, and their writings are more than eighteen centuries old, and how do we know that their testimony has reached us correctly? We reply: just as we know that other ancient facts reach us correctly, only with a much greater measure of certainty than attaches to almost any other facts of ancient history.

It should never be forgotten that the New Testament writings were deemed sacred books by the primitive Church. They were early translated into various languages, so that their testimony has come down to us through

numerous channels. Then they were quoted constantly by Christian authors, and so numerous are these quotations that it has been asserted, with a reasonable degree of colour, that were the New Testament lost, it might be restored from the quotations in Christian literature.

But this is not all: the death and the resurrection of Christ are certified to us by monumental observances, which carry us back to the apostolic age, and set us down, as it were, among the first generation of believers, and show us the conviction left on their minds by the facts, while the memory of them was still fresh. The Lord's Supper is the monument of Christ's death; and from Pentecost down to our day, probably not one week has passed in which bands of disciples have not met together to show forth the Lord's death. And in the Christian Sabbath, observed on the first day of the week from the apostolic age down through all the centuries, the Church of God has proclaimed its unbroken faith in the resurrection of Christ.

As time removes us farther and farther from the testimony of the original eye-witnesses, this line of evidence may call for more research and study, but for thoughtful minds it will never seem really weak.

II. *There are evidences which remain the same in all ages.*

There are some things which shine with self-evidencing power, and have no need of external proof. They are equally clear in all ages. Those who open their eyes can always see them.

The sun evidences its own existence and character to all who look at it. Its light remains unchanged from age to age. It is the same now as when Adam dwelt in Eden,

when Abraham left Ur or the Chaldees, when Moses wandered in the wilderness, or when John saw visions on Patmos. Mists and clouds sometimes obscure it, but it always comes forth again with undimmed splendour.

1. Christianity is, in substance, bound up with the Holy Scriptures. They are a divine revelation, divinely committed to writing. For this revelation important historical evidences may be adduced, and these are of value. But after all, the best evidence for the divine authorship of the Bible is the book itself. The footprints of deity are stamped upon it; and to those who study it with open eye its divine origin is manifest.

Examine its structure and character. It is made up of some sixty-six books, written by more than forty authors, scattered over a period of nearly sixteen centuries; yet one style of thought distinguishes them, and one ripening plan runs through them all, and makes them really one book.

Then what a revelation this multiform book gives of the character and perfections of God! It is a revelation gradually unfolded, as the education of the race advances, and men are able to bear it, and when it is finally completed in the New Testament, the world has seen nothing like it.

And what a view the Sacred Writings give of human sin and ruin. With unerring skill they have sounded the dark depths of human depravity and misery. And the man who knows his own heart will always be the first to recognize the truth of the description.

And what a discovery they have made of the remedy for man's disease and ruin; a remedy worthy of God and adapted to man. They deal at once with the guilt and the

defilement of sin. They point to an all-sufficient atonement for the one, and to the quickening and cleansing power of the Spirit for the other. This remedy, if real, is surely adequate.

Then look at the perfect code of morals given in the Scriptures for our guidance in practical conduct! Who can improve on the ten commandments? And what example can be better than that which Christ has left us that we should walk in His steps? Of this moral code, commended to us by precept and example, we can safely say, that nothing can be added to it nor anything taken from it.

2. Then look at the central character presented in the Scriptures—the person of Christ.

The sun is not more conspicuous in the heavens than Jesus Christ in the Bible. And like the sun, He is His own best witness. In the New Testament we have four distinct lives of Christ, written by contemporary authors, each from his own standpoint. They are written with all the freedom of independent authorship, but in their representations of Christ they are in complete harmony with each other. They show Him mingling artlessly and naturally with all classes, good and bad; and in all the relations in which He appears, He exhibits a spotless, perfect manhood, blended with a majesty more than human. We search history and fiction in vain for such a character. If this portrait was not drawn from real life, whence did it come? That four men, comparatively unlearned, and destitute of literary skill and experience, should have invented a character so matchless in its divine majesty, and so natural in its human simplicity and purity, that nothing approaching it is found in all literature, would be almost as great a miracle as the life they have portrayed.

Then mark how this life of Christ's, so wonderfully enshrined in the gospels, is linked with the New Testament conceptions of His person and work. The person is one who "was God," and "was made flesh, and dwelt among us"; a being so unique that He bridges the gulf between man and God, and brings both together in the mystery of His own person. And with this view of His person is linked the idea of Christ's atoning sacrifice, "His blood shed for many, for the remission of sins." And with the completion of the atoning sacrifice, again, is linked the mission of the Holy Spirit, to apply to men the work of Christ, to quicken the dead and sanctify the living. The life of Christ in the gospels, and the great ideas which underlie and pervade the New Testament teaching in regard to Christ and His work, are all of a piece, and never came from man's invention.

Apologetic vindications of Christianity are good in their place, but after all, the best apologetic for Christianity is Christ in the beauty of His life, the glory of His person, the sufficiency of His atoning sacrifice, and the power of His Spirit. This crowning proof is the same in all ages. It shines in its self-evidencing light, "the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever."

III. *Evidences which grow stronger with the lapse of time.*

When a bridge, or an important public work, designed to bear a great strain, is built, it is customary to test its strength by actual experiment, and the longer and the more fully it is tested the firmer is our assurance of its strength.

The apostle Paul seems to have regarded himself as a kind of test case to show Christ's power to save:

"Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show forth all long suffering, for a pattern to them who should hereat er believe on Him to life everlasting."—1 Tim. 1: 16. The gospel method of salvation was tested in him and found sufficient. If Jesus Christ has saved the chief of sinners, none need despair.

The argument for the truth of the gospel from experience is very simple: the gospel makes many promises to those who accept it, and experience shows that these promises are made good. The remedy which always cures the disease is the right remedy for it.

The gospel promises to all who embrace it the forgiveness of sins, renewal of heart and life, and strength for Christian service.

The forgiveness of sin is a divine act, and cannot be directly a matter of human experience. This is true, but it is also true, that when the guilty embrace Christ by faith, the sense of guilt is removed, and conscience, which is the echo of God's voice within us, is at peace. When Christian looks at the cross, the burden rolls off his shoulder, and he is conscious then that Christ has made peace by the blood of His cross.

It is also undeniable that a wonderful moral and spiritual change is apparent in the hearts and lives of all who embrace Christ. They are new creatures, and have passed from death unto life. Doubtless they are always imperfect in the present life, but the change is real, habitual and progressive, so that the tree is known by its fruits.

They get strength for Christian service. They do good works. No sooner were Lydia and the jailor led to

Christ than they confessed Christ and began to minister to His servants. When the disciples at Jerusalem were, by the persecution which arose at the death of Stephen, scattered abroad, they went everywhere preaching the Word.

Now what we claim is, that wherever the gospel has been faithfully preached, these results have been realized in all who believe. All down the ages it has made good its promises. If a remedy is successful, wherever it is faithfully used, what other evidence do we need of its efficacy?

This argument is cumulative in its character, gathering strength with the increase of the number who have experienced the power of the gospel, and can "set to their seal that God is true." If the argument from eye-witness seems to grow weaker with the lapse of time, this grows stronger. It is like a river receiving new accessions in its course, which rolls on from age to age with growing volume and strength.

When Peter stood up on the day of Pentecost to preach the first sermon under the new dispensation, he was fully persuaded of the truth of the gospel, but his conviction could not have rested on the observed results of its power, when accompanied by the outpouring of the Spirit. But before that day was ended, a new line of evidence opened to his mind. He saw three thousand delivered at once from the bondage of guilt and sin, entering consciously into the liberty and joy of a higher life. In the apostolic age, these results seem to have uniformly attended the acceptance of the gospel. John speaks of Christians as those who "have passed from death unto life." Paul affirms that if any man is in Christ Jesus he is

"a new *creation*." And what was it, short of a new creation, which changed Saul the persecutor into the great apostle of the Gentiles? And Paul, writing to the Corinthians, after enumerating many of the worst forms of vice by which men are degraded, adds, "And such were some of you, but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God."—1 Cor. 6: 11.

This argument has been gathering force ever since. All down the ages, and in all lands, the gospel has proved the power of God unto salvation: it has taken away the consciousness of guilt from the worst of men, who have embraced it, and purified their hearts and transformed their lives.

It is historically certain that the faithful preaching of Christ in the fulness of His atoning work, and life-giving power, has been attended in the experience of those who embrace it by those results which we sum up in the word *salvation*. The guilty have the sense of guilt removed from the conscience, the ruling power of lusts and passions broken, and men debased by sin are made in a goodly measure what they ought to be, and are lifted up into a higher and purer life. No one would think of ascribing such results to the acceptance of any form of unbelief, but they manifestly attend the gospel and bespeak its divine origin.

Men have sometimes, even in the sacred desk, denounced the vicarious sacrifice of Christ as a fiction, and the regenerating power of His Spirit as a delusion, but meanwhile the gospel has held on its way unmoved, and everywhere has done its promised work. It has brought conscious peace and pardon to the guilty, restored the

vicious to the Divine image, and lighted up the dark valley with the hope of heaven.

This line of evidence is constantly growing stronger. Each generation swells the cloud of witnesses whose experience testifies to the truth of the gospel. We speak of "the noble army of the martyrs," and they are a great host. They stood firm in the hour of temptation and in the article of death, because what the gospel promised had been verified in their experience. This made them conquerors in the conflict. But the martyrs constitute only a small portion of that innumerable multitude whose lives witness to the truth of the gospel. Personally we know but few of them in the present life. But could we see at once, as we one day shall see, the entire number of the redeemed out of all nations, and the extent of the moral and spiritual change wrought in them by the gospel of the grace of God, we should need no other evidence that "we have not followed cunningly devised fables." John must have had some such glimpse when he wrote: "After this I beheld and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; And cried with a loud voice, saying: 'Salvation to our God, which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb.'" At present we see the results of God's remedial scheme in part, and we know them in part; but we see enough to show that our faith is well founded, and to assure us that we may say of the gospel, as has been written of the virtuous woman: "Give her of the fruit of her hands; and let her own works praise her in the gates."

If I may venture to refer to my own experience as a minis-

ter of the Word, I may say that in every field, where it was my privilege to exercise my ministry stately, I have been permitted to see evidence that the gospel is still the power of God unto salvation. Its ancient power to remove the consciousness of guilt, and to bring men out of the bondage of sin into the liberty and joy of a higher life, has been verified. And had I preached Christ with firmer faith, greater simplicity, and more entire dependence on the proffered aid of the Spirit, I would doubtless have seen more abundant fruit. But I have seen enough to make it impossible for me to believe that, in accepting the gospel, we have "followed cunningly devised fables."

And let me earnestly urge each of my hearers who has not entered into peace, to accept the gospel, and embrace Christ for himself. No system can be better attested, and no Saviour can be more worthy of acceptance. We invite you to make personal experiment of its power. What it has done for others it will do for you.

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