

THE
WORKS
OF
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CONTAINING
AN AUTHENTIC NARRATIVE, &C., LETTERS ON RELIGIOUS SUBJECTS, CARDIPHONIA,
DISCOURSES INTENDED FOR THE PULPIT,
SERMONS PREACHED IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF OLNEY,
A REVIEW OF ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY, OLNEY HYMNS, POEMS,
MESSIAH, OCCASIONAL SERMONS, AND TRACTS.

TO WHICH ARE PREFIXED
MEMOIRS OF HIS LIFE, &c.

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THE PUBLICATION OF THE GOSPEL.

SERMON XXX.

The Lord gave the word, great was the company of those that published it (or of the preachers). PSALM lxviii. 11.

PERHAPS no one psalm has given greater exercise to the skill and the patience of commentators and critics than the sixty-eighth. I suppose the difficulties do not properly belong to the psalm, but arise from our ignorance of various circumstances to which the psalmist alludes, which probably were at that time generally known and understood. The first verse is the same with the stated form of benediction which was used whenever the ark of the Lord set forward while Israel sojourned in the wilderness (Numb. x. 35); which confirms the prevailing opinion, that the psalm was primarily designed as an act of thanksgiving, to accompany the removal of the ark to Zion, by David. The seventh and eighth verses are repeated, with little variation, from the song of Deborah, Judges v. 4, 5. The leading scope of the whole appears to be, first, a recapitulation of God's gracious dealing with Israel, and of the great things he had done for them, from the time he delivered them from their bondage in Egypt, and then a transition, in the spirit of prophecy, to the far greater things he would do for his people, under and by the gospel dispensation, in consequence of Messiah's exaltation to receive gifts for rebellious men. This verse, though the particular occasion is not specified, probably refers to some season of deliverance or victory, when the women, according to the custom of the nation, assembled to praise the Lord, with timbrels, songs, and dances, Exod. xv. The songs and responses of Miriam and her companions, and of the women who welcomed Saul and David after the defeat of the Philistine (1 Sam. xviii. 6, 7), I have formerly mentioned as instances. The word which is rendered *Those who published* or *preached*, being expressed with a feminine termination, leads the mind to this sense. But we are not necessarily confined to it; for the word rendered *preacher* in the book of Ecclesiastes, is likewise in the feminine form, though we are sure the person intended by it was Solomon.

However, this passage is properly introduced in the Messiah, and in its proper place, immediately after the view given of our Saviour's triumphant ascension, as it leads us to consider the first visible effect of that great event; for soon afterwards, when the day of Pentecost was fully come, the Lord gave the word, Acts ii. 1-4. The Holy Spirit, the precious *gift*, which Jesus had received for rebellious men, descended with visible emblems, and a powerful energy, and inspired and qualified his disciples for the great work of establishing and spreading his spiritual kingdom. From that hour, great

was the number of the preachers, and great was the success and efficacy of their mission. So that in a few years the gospel spread like the light, from Jerusalem, through all Judea and Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth. And he who said, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world” (Matt, xxviii. 20), has, by the same Spirit, perpetuated his word, and a succession of preachers, to our time, and has promised to perpetuate and work by the same means, till time shall be no more.

My text, therefore, if not a direct prophecy of the publication of the gospel, is at least a fit motto to a discourse on this very important subject. We may consider it in two senses, which, though something different, are equally agreeable to the words before us, and to the general tenor of the scripture.

I. That the message is the Lord’s.—He gave the word, and prescribed to his servants the subject matter of their preaching.

II. That the messengers employed are called and sent forth by him.—The Lord gave the word or command; in consequence of which word, the number of preachers was great, as when in the beginning he said, “Let there be light, and there was light.”

I. The Lord gave the word which the multitude of preachers went forth to publish. His merciful design was great,—to deliver sinners from bondage, misery and death: and to bless them with liberty, life, and peace. But they are by nature rebellious and obstinate, and must be made willing. He only can subdue their prejudices, and soften their spirits; and he has promised to display his power in their favour by a certain mean of his own appointment, and we cannot expect that he will do it in any other way. This mean is the gospel, which for its admirable suitableness and efficacy, is commended to us as his wisdom and his power, 1 Cor. i. 23, 24. He has given it for this purpose, and his blessing makes it successful. He has said concerning it, “As the rain cometh down and the snow from heaven, and watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater; so shall my word be, that goeth forth out of my mouth; it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please; it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it,” Is. lv. 10, 11. It has been confirmed by the experience of ages, that no mean but this can produce the desirable effect. It is confirmed by observation in the present day. If the wisdom of man, if learning, if oratory, if animated descriptions of the beauty of virtue, and pathetic persuasions to the practice of it, could reform, we should be a reformed people. But alas! this is only to oppose a mound of sand to the violence of a flood. Notwithstanding many ingenious sermons and treatises upon this plan are admired and praised, wickedness prevails and triumphs. They have little influence upon the conduct of civil life; and I may boldly say, no influence to inspire the heart with the love and peace of God, and to bring it into a habit of

subjection to his will and command. Nothing will do this but the gospel, the word which the Lord has given. This alone shows the evil of sin in its true light, affords a solid ground for the hope of mercy, and furnishes those motives which alone are sufficient to break the force of the temptations and difficulties with which we have to conflict. When this word is simply and cordially received, an immediate and wonderful change takes place. The sinner abandons his false hopes and vain pursuits, is freed from his former slavery to the love of the world and the fear of man, and becomes the willing servant of him who redeemed him with his own blood.

But we are sometimes asked, what we understand by the gospel? The use of the term in a restrained sense, so as to imply there are but few comparatively who preach it, is deemed invidious and assuming; and it is supposed by many, that a sermon, if delivered from a pulpit, and if the text be taken from the Bible, must of course be the gospel. It is undeniable, however, that there are a variety of different and opposite sentiments delivered from pulpits; and surely the gospel cannot be opposite, contrary, yea contradictory to itself! It is a mournful consideration, that multitudes of people are not qualified to judge of this point. Not properly for want of ability, for many of them are persons of good sense and discernment, and can judge and talk well upon other subjects; but for want of attention. Their application is engrossed by the demands of business or pleasure, and they have neither leisure nor taste for a careful perusal of the scriptures, nor for the examination of religious sentiments. If the language and elocution of the preacher be good, and if there be no close and painful address to the conscience, they are satisfied. The apostle Paul undoubtedly preached the gospel; and he tells us himself that he preached Christ crucified; he preached Christ, as appointed of God, wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption, 1 Cor. i. 30. He preached the cross of Christ (Gal. vi. 14), he gloried in it, and he determined to glory in nothing else. The gospel treats all mankind as already in a state of condemnation; it declares their utter inability to save or help themselves; and it gives assurance of pardon and salvation to all who believe in the Son of God. That they may be encouraged and enabled to believe, it describes the dignity of his person, the necessity and greatness of his sufferings, the completeness of his atonement, the prevalence of his intercession—his love, authority, to him, who therefore died and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and the living, Rom. xiv. 9.

There is likewise a certain energy or power which accompanies the gospel when it is truly preached, which sufficiently characterizes and distinguishes it from all other religious schemes and systems. Our Lord, during his personal ministry, frequently gave proofs that he knew the heart of man. When Zaccheus thought himself unknown and unseen, he called him by his name, Luke xix. 5. He reminded Nathanael of what had passed in secret

under the fig-tree (John i. 48): and by a few words, brought to the remembrance of the woman of Samaria all that she had done in her life, John iv. 29. A similar effect accompanies the preaching of his gospel to this day. The gospel is preached, when they who are present find the secrets of their hearts are made manifest; when the preacher, who perhaps never saw them before, reminds them of what they have done, or said, or thought, possibly of things transacted long ago, and almost forgotten by themselves; and likewise describes the very feelings of their hearts while he is speaking to them. It is usually in this way that conviction of sin first takes place; and in this way, that a convinced burdened sinner meets with seasonable support and direction, so exactly suited to his case, that he almost thinks the preacher is speaking to none but himself. No preachers but those who speak in conformity to the word which the Lord gave, have this power over the heart and conscience.

II. It is owing to the word, the appointment, and power of God, that any persons are induced or enabled to preach this gospel. Men may, indeed, assume the office of a preacher upon other grounds; there are too many who do. But though they speak in the name of the Lord, and as his ministers, if he has not sent them, they cannot declare his message in such a manner as to make full proof of their ministry, 2 Tim. iv. 5. They may profit themselves, according to their low views, and may obtain such honours and emoluments as the world can give; but they have not the honour which cometh from God only. They are not wise to win souls, Prov. xi. 30. They have no testimony in the consciences of their hearers. They may deliver truths occasionally, which are valuable and useful in their proper places; but for want of knowing how to connect them with what the apostle styles, The truth as it is in Jesus (Eph. iv. 21), they are unable either to break the hard heart, or to heal the wounded spirit. The thoughtless are not alarmed, nor the ignorant instructed. The wicked go on in their evil ways —

The hungry sheep look up but are not fed.

Nay, we see, in fact, though a few persons may still be found, who place their religion in a dull, unmeaning attendance upon the form of public worship, upon any form in which it was their lot to be educated; yet, in many places, the bulk of the people, by their contempt of the Lord's day, and by their customary manner of absenting themselves from their appointed teachers, give sufficient proof that they have neither found, nor expect to find, so much benefit or pleasure, as to make them think it worth their while to attend them.

It will appear to competent judges, that faithful preachers are called and prepared for their office by the Lord, the head of the church, and not by

human institutions, from the following considerations :

1. That the gospel cannot be rightly understood but by divine teaching. The natural man, however distinguished by abilities or literature, cannot receive the things of the Spirit of God (1 Cor. ii. 14); nay, he cannot even discern them. He may, indeed, know something of the gospel system, considered as a matter of science; he may know how to defend the outworks of Christianity, and be master of the external evidences for its truth; and he may espouse orthodox opinions, and be a successful champion in the field of controversy. But the inward power and life, that which constitutes the essential difference of true religion, is no less remote from his apprehension, than the idea of light is from a person born blind. This he can only learn by experience. The first lesson received and learnt by those who are taught of God, is a conviction of guilt, ignorance, and misery—and then they begin to learn the importance, necessity, and design of the gospel. The man who is thus instructed, if the Lord be pleased to call him to the office of teaching others, will in due time proceed to deliver to the people what he has himself learnt; not with hesitation, uncertainty, or indifference, not what he has acquired by hearsay or from books, but he has the witness in himself, 1 John v. 10. His heart teacheth his mouth, Prov. xvi. 23. He believes, therefore he speaks. He simply and freely declares that which he himself has known, and seen, and tasted of the word of life. And speaking from the fulness of his heart, with an earnestness inspired by the greatness and importance of his subject, he speaks to the heart and feelings of his hearers, and impresses a manifestation of the truth upon their minds.

2. That the desire of preaching this gospel, when known, if it be a right desire, must likewise be given. If a man should attempt the service, without counting the cost, or considering the consequences, he will most probably be disgusted and wearied. And if he seriously and properly considers before-hand what he is about to engage in, and has a due sense of his own weakness, he will tremble at the prospect, and direct his thoughts to some other employment, unless his call and support be from on high. What courage, wisdom, meekness, and zeal, appear requisite, in the view of such an inquirer, to qualify a man for preaching, and continuing to preach, a doctrine so unpleasing to the world, as the doctrine of the cross has in all ages proved! What opposition, and snares, and difficulties, what fightings from without, what fears within, may be expected! Surely he will be ready to shrink back, and to say, Who is sufficient for these things? But the Lord by the constraining sense of his love, and by giving a deep impression of the worth of souls, and by exciting in the mind a dependence upon his all-sufficiency, can and does encourage those whom he calls and chooses, to serve him in the gospel. In themselves they are quite unequal to what is before them, but they obey his voice; they trust in his promises for guidance

and protection, and are not disappointed. We are therefore directed to pray, that the Lord of the harvest would send, or rather (according to the force of the Greek word) thrust forth labourers into his harvest, Matt. ix. 38.

3. That only he who sends forth his ministers can enable them to persevere. It is a service of continual exertion and expense, and requires a continual supply. The opposition of the world, and the power of temptation, acting upon the weakness and depravity of the heart, would quickly prevail against the best ministers, if they were left to carry on the warfare at their own charges. They are at times, yea frequently, in situations and circumstances which teach them feelingly the meaning of the apostle's words, "We were pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life," 2 Cor. i. 8. Besides the trials incidental to the christian profession, which they are exposed to in common with others, they have many which are peculiar to their calling as preachers of the gospel. Their chief pre-eminence over Christians in private life is a painful one; they have the honour of bearing a double share of the heat and burden of the day, and of standing in the foremost ranks of the battle, to provoke and receive the fiercest assaults of the enemy. Their only resource and hope is in the faithfulness and compassion of their Lord, under whose banner and eye they fight, and who has said, "Lo! I am with you always, even to the end of the world."

4. That the Lord only can give success to their endeavours. Paul may plant, and Apollos may water, but there is no increase unless he affords a blessing, 1 Cor. iii. 6. It is at least a presumptive proof, that he has called a man to preach, if he owns his labours, since he has not promised to own any but those whom he sends.

We must however allow, and observe, that to preach salvation to others, and even to be instrumental in saving souls, will not absolutely prove that the preacher is in a state of salvation himself; we hope it is generally so; but there are exceptions and instances, which should awaken our circumspection, and keep us constantly looking to the Lord in a spirit of humility and dependence. There was a Judas among the apostles; and we are assured that at the last day, some, yea many, will plead having done great things in the name of Christ, whom he will notwithstanding disown, as workers of iniquity, Matth. vii. 22, 23. Even the apostle Paul was impressed by this thought, and he has recorded the improvement he made of it for our instruction: "I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection, lest that by any means, after I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway, 1 Cor. ix. 27.