

## ART. III.—"THE FULNESS OF THE GENTILES."

THAT expression, "the fulness of the Gentiles" (Rom. xi. 25), is one of the first importance, for many things depend upon it. First, the period of Israel's national blindness and rejection of her Messiah; second, the time allotted by God to missionary work amongst the heathen; and, third (we may also believe), the day of our Lord's return—centre upon the hour when that epoch shall have arrived.

It is needful at the threshold of our subject to analyze the word translated "fulness," both in the Authorized and Revised Versions. Now, the late Bishop Lightfoot has left us in his "Commentary upon the Colossians" a long and careful essay upon the use of the word *πλήρωμα* in the New Testament, and two or three of the leading thoughts in that essay may here be given. The verb *πληροῦν*, from which *πλήρωμα* comes, occurs about *one hundred* times in the New Testament. It has two meanings, viz., "to fill" and "to fulfil," and it is translated with the latter meaning quite four times more frequently than with the former. The substantive which occurs in the text with which I began means, according to Lightfoot, "that which is completed," *i.e.*, "the complement," "the full tale," so that when a certain number is in view (as the number of the elect known by God), a time will arrive when that exact number is reached, and then the *πλήρωμα* is accomplished.

We should be mistaken, then, if we were to explain "the fulness of the Gentiles" by such an expression as "the whole" or "all" of the Gentiles. It seems, on the contrary, according to Lightfoot, that *πλήρωμα* is not used by the Apostles St. Paul and St. John as a word connected with the meaning to *fill*, but with the meaning to *fulfil*, and that it therefore does not mean the whole of the Gentiles, but *that which is completed* of the Gentiles; the full tale of a certain number laid down and foreseen by God. When this number is complete, when the *πλήρωμα* has been called forth (the full complement or number of those who *out of* the Gentiles believe God and the testimony He has given concerning the Son of His love), then, as I believe, the fourth chapter of the Thessalonians shall be accomplished, and the Church of the firstborn, formed of true believers, of Jews and Gentiles, a temple of living stones, shall be removed from earth to the presence of the Lord—the marriage supper of the Lamb. This view, if I understand it aright, is in direct antagonism to the idea (held still, I imagine, by many) that the Gentile, or heathen, world is to be converted before the coming of Christ.

If any of my readers hold that view, I merely ask that they will read their Bibles again *without that idea* just for an experiment, and see what the result will be to their judgment.

Let us briefly consider that aspect of the question: *The heathen world is to be converted before Christ comes.*

There are *three* solid reasons to be brought forward against that view: (1) The Lord left behind Him the promise of His return at any moment to be the cheer and comfort of His Church; and it is only the *slothful* servant who saith, "My Lord delayeth His coming until the heathen world is converted." Is it likely that the Lord would have left an expectation behind Him so deadening to the spirit as this? (2) A remarkable little book came before the world a few years ago called "A Century of Missions." One of the startling things which it revealed, based upon apparently unimpeachable returns, was that the heathen population of the world is rapidly and enormously *increasing*—not from the failure of missionary work, nothing of the kind, but from the humane legislation of Christian governments over great heathen populations (such as ours over India), by which barbarous practices to young and old, the traffic in slaves, human sacrifices, and internecine wars are repressed. Our small missionary efforts are steadily bringing in a few everywhere to God, but they are almost as nothing to the great increase of the heathen themselves under our sway. This fact does not look like the conversion of the world before our Lord's return. (3) This idea seems to many of us to be contrary to the whole tenor of many of our Lord's words—to such a chapter as 2 Tim. iii., and to such an expression as this, "Evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived."

Very different from this view, and yet not quite Scriptural, as I imagine, is the other, held by many, that the Gospel must be "preached as a witness" in all nations before the return of our Lord. He Himself has said that it must so be preached before the end of *this dispensation*; but that is not the same thing. Many students of prophecy hold that this is to be the work of the godly Jewish remnant, after the Church has been taken up, and that a considerable period intervenes between the coming of our Lord for His Church and the end of the dispensation. It is, I suppose, pretty clear that "the great tribulation" lies between those two events, and perhaps many other things; and it is a delaying of His return to say that it cannot be till the preaching of the Gospel, even as a *witness* in all nations, has first taken place.

The view suggested by the text is, I believe, as follows: The certain number foreseen by God as coming in from the Gentile

world is now being made up, and may be made up at any time, quite independent of the end of the age. When it is completed, then 1 Thess. iv. tells us what shall follow. *After that* many, both Jews and Gentiles, though not part of the bride or "Church of the Firstborn," shall be saved, when God's judgments are in all the world, by the preaching of "the gospel of the kingdom," through Jewish agency, to which probably St. Paul refers (Rom. xi. 12-15). *After that, again*, but not in this dispensation, "the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the *glory* of the Lord"; at that time, viz., in the millennial reign, the Old Testament prophecies of Isaiah ii. and Micah iv., and multitudes of passages of the same kind in the Psalms, etc., about the Gentiles flocking into the temple of the Lord and the Messiah reigning over them gloriously, shall be fulfilled. This is all very different from the teaching that bids us wait for the conversion of the world *before* our Lord's return. We wait for the Lord as those that watch for the morning; but we have, as faithful watchmen, to proclaim, "The morning cometh and *also the night.*" The Church's hope loses its heartiness, power, and practical efficacy under the weary shadow of waiting for the world's conversion.

To repeat in a different form what I have already advanced. The former, or Abrahamic, age, till Christ's first advent, was the dispensation of Israel — afterwards, when Christ was rejected by His own, the blindness or hardening in part happened unto Israel as a nation, until, the Gospel being preached to the Gentiles, the full tale of them (even the Gentiles who have a share in Christ's *glory*) should be received into His Church, the Bride; that is the season in which we now live. This is the period when the spiritual Church is being built and the Bride is being made ready. But when the complement from the Gentiles is made up, then the Gentile history of *grace* and the Church period shall cease, Christ will come *for* His Church, and His Bride shall be caught up to meet Him. *After this* shall be, we believe, the days of trouble, of which the sorrows of Jerusalem were a miniature and foreshadowing. *After that again*, when trouble is at its height (as He came to the disciples in the boat on Galilee), Christ shall visibly appear not *for* His Church, but *with* it, as the Jews' once-rejected Messiah, now their Deliverer—not to take them to heaven, but to destroy their enemies and to turn away ungodliness from Jacob in the place of His power on the earth. Then the evil powers of rebellious heathenism shall be cut off, with the professing Laodicean Church and Popery, and such-like superstitions, and then we believe that Israel shall be delivered from its

blindness, and being saved nationally (which, of course, cannot take place while the *Church period* is going on, where there is neither Jew nor Greek), shall turn to the Messiah, who will reign over the house of Jacob for ever. Thus converted, Israel shall have a different position from the Church of the Firstborn—into it (the latter) now, and in the past, both Jew and Gentile are admitted as individuals, as living stones, and this shall have been completed before Elijah the prophet comes to fulfil his mission to Israel and to prepare them for the Lord.

Viewed in this light, what a new importance is imparted to missionary work! and what intense reality! We are not engaged in operations which in the days of our children or grandchildren may pave the way for our Master's coming and rear gradually in the course of generations a temple for our God—we should work like those who listen every moment for the sound of the chariot-wheels—we ourselves may be—yes, I will venture further—we may *expect* to be among the workers who shall see the headstone brought out with shoutings. This view of the meaning of the words “the fulness of the Gentiles” brings the end of our work very near—“known unto God are all His works from the beginning of the world”—we know not how soon this work shall be accomplished and the exact number of those among the Gentiles brought into His Church. How this should stimulate us to burning enthusiasm in our Master's cause! Perhaps an earnest prayer offered by one who reads these words may bring down a blessing upon some worker in the Mission Field, and so be the means of bringing in the last one to complete the *πλήρωμα*; and then, what remains to hinder the coming of our Lord!

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#### ART. IV.—CHAUCER'S RELIGIOUS SYMPATHIES.

IT is clear, from the “*Canterbury Tales*,” that Chaucer had a very low opinion of the established religion of his time. Again and again we find him attacking clerical abuses, and pouring scorn upon the pride, worldliness, and venality of the Churchmen of his day. Professor Reed, in his excellent work on English literature, says: “The writings of Chaucer have an interest in connection with ecclesiastical history; for, abounding as they do in keen and earnest satire of clerical and monastic abuses, they have truly been reckoned among the means by which popular sentiment was animated and prepared