

*THE MINISTRY OF LIGHT.*

(2 COR. IV. 1-6.)

THE historical situation may be briefly described. The Apostle had founded the Church at Corinth, and had watched over its growth with a father's anxious and loving care. He found that many troubles had arisen, and many disorders had crept in among them. He had already written them one Epistle. When he learned from Timothy and Titus what was the effect of his first Epistle, he writes again to deepen the impression made, and to remove from the minds of the Corinthian people certain prejudices and misconceptions they had formed regarding him and his ministry. He intended to visit them again. In order that his visit might be for their edification, he must by all means get them into a frame of mind which would enable them to receive him and his ministrations loyally and gladly. He must therefore vindicate his apostolic authority. He has a right to be heard; he has authority to reprove, rebuke, and exhort, for he is an Apostle of Jesus Christ. His apostolic authority had been vehemently denied by many; and he must, not as a personal matter, but in the interests of the Gospel, vindicate his authority.

A main part of the vindication of his apostleship consists in a description of the character of the ministry he has exercised among them. He is willing to test it by its nature and results. Let the Corinthian Church do so, and he will abide by their decision. The section of the Epistle which we are now to consider sets forth one aspect of the ministry of the Gospel, and on this Paul lays stress for the vindication of his claim to the apostleship. True, he does not depend on this plea alone. He knows that he is an Apostle, that he is sent by the Lord Jesus Christ to be an ambassador to the nations. He has received the ministry;

he has not run without being sent. But he is content to waive all other proof for the time, and to appeal to the Corinthian Church on the ground of his personal character and the character of the ministry he had exercised among them. "Our glorying is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and sincerity of God, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we behaved ourselves in the world, and more abundantly to you-ward" (2 Cor. i. 12). His appeal is not only to personal character and motive, but also to results which any one could verify. "Thanks be unto God, which always leadeth us in triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest through us the savour of His knowledge in every place" (2 Cor. ii. 14). Nay, the Corinthians themselves are the sufficient and abiding proof of his ministry. They are "an epistle of Christ." They show that Paul is an able minister of the New Testament.

In various ways, and from different points of view, he sets forth the character of the ministry he has received. It is "the ministration of the Spirit," "the ministration of righteousness." It is a ministration of freedom, and of glory, and those who receive this ministry, those who exercise it, and those for whom it is exercised, "are transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord the Spirit" (iii. 18). At this point begins the passage we seek to study more fully.

The possession and the exercise of such a ministry imply certain effects on the character of the Apostle. He cannot be a true minister, if he does not exclude from motive and action every unworthy aim and purpose. For this ministry has begun in mercy. He has not won it for himself, nor obtained the vocation of a minister by any merit of his own. So he writes, "even as we have obtained mercy." He acknowledges his helplessness; he knows that he cannot preach, nor do any good to himself or others, except in so far as God has had compassion on him. When he thinks of

the ministry, and of the pains and sorrows, as well as of the grace and glory, of it, the Apostle ever returns to this thought, that he had obtained mercy, that God had had compassion on him. "Howbeit I obtained mercy," he says in the First Epistle to Timothy. It is the undertone of all his thinking, and to this thought he ever returns. He must continue to fulfil the ministry he has received, since both the beginning, and the continuance of it are signal instances of the mercy of God.

He finds himself in the possession of "this ministry." He has not "taken the honour to himself," nor can he lay it down when he pleases. It is the work of God, and Paul must serve while life and strength endure. The manner of service is also determined for him. As Bengel says: "*Misericordia Dei, per quam ministerium accipitur facit strenuos et sinceros.*" The Apostle cannot faint or fail, nor suffer himself to be discouraged. True, he may have to ask, "Who is sufficient for these things?" If so, it is only to answer, "We are not as the many, corrupting the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God, speak we in Christ" (ii. 17). Dangers and difficulties may meet him, he may be spoken against and maligned, his Gospel may be veiled, and his ministry seem to fail; but because he has obtained mercy he does not faint nor fail. The mercy of God has found him, and made him simple, strong, sincere.

The service in which he stands limits him also in the use of means. Certain means he must renounce. There are ways of action he cannot use. He cannot do evil that good may come. Not even in the interests of the Gospel can he do aught contrary to the spirit of the Gospel. "We have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully" (iv. 2). He proceeds from the general to the particular. He will not yield to the impulse of shame, nor seek to hide

what the sense of shame prompts him to conceal. The ministry must be honest and open and true. It must neither extenuate nor exaggerate, nor yield in any way to the suggestions of a mere sense of honour. These are weapons of the flesh, which the Apostle cannot wield. Nor can he walk in craftiness, that is, he must not use crafty means to gain his ends; and he must use the word of God fairly and rightly, according to its meaning and purpose.

These are the negative conditions of the ministry of the word of God, conditions which every ministry is bound to fulfil. As we look at them, and ponder over their wide significance, we are reminded of the statements made by eminent men of science with regard to the scientific love of truth for its own sake. They tell us of the severe conditions under which men of science must serve if they are to be true to their calling. Some of them indeed speak as if they alone had a scientific conscience, and had a monopoly of that spirit which looks at truth and fact objectively, and with supreme disregard of all other considerations. But the scientific regard to truth is manifested in regal splendour by the Apostle in this great passage, as indeed it is throughout his writings. We need not carry the war into the enemy's country, nor inquire how far scientific men live up to the height of their great calling. Let us accept their teaching, and disregard their practice when inconsistent with it. However high and pure their teaching with regard to the purity of truth may be, we had not to wait in order to learn it from them. Here we have it in living, concrete form, ruling the practice of a man who lived and acted according to its behests many centuries ago; and to him we would do well to listen. He will tell us that there are many ways in which we may not walk, and many means we may not use. Whatsoever kind of ministry we may have in the Church of Christ, whether we have to speak to popular audiences, in the full glare of public life, or whether

our work is in the study, in all cases we have to renounce the hidden things of shame, put craftiness away, and handle the word of God fairly and honestly. We must not bring prejudice to exposition, nor permit tradition to draw a veil over the word of God. We must follow the truth wheresoever it may lead us, let the consequences be what they may : such are the teaching and practice of the Apostle.

On the positive side he is equally precise. He desires to commend himself to the people of Corinth, but he will not, as the antagonistic teachers did, use letters of commendation, or descend to intrigue, or adulterate the word of God, to win their honour and love. He has one, only one, way of commending himself. "By the manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God." These are the only legitimate means for him ; all others are excluded by the very nature of his ministry. He has received the truth, and the truth he must make manifest ; and by truth he means the whole contents of the Gospel of Christ. His mission is to make the truth contained in the Gospel known to all. The truth thus made manifest is of itself sufficient to commend the preacher to the people. He needs no other commendation, and ought not to seek any other. The limits he prescribes to himself are a source of strength to him, for they enable him to go straight to his object ; and his object is to win men for the truth and by the truth. But a further limitation meets us as we advance. It is not all kinds of Gospel truth, nor all ways of presenting it, that the Apostle means. It is such truth and such a way of presenting truth as directly appeals to the conscience. The aim is practical, and is meant to influence conduct ; and therefore the truth of the Gospel is presented by the Apostle in such a way as to move the conscience and stir to action.

It may indeed be said that all kinds of truth have their value, and all appeal to the conscience. It is also true that

every truth tests a man, and declares of what sort he is. By the reception he gives to any discovery of a truth in science newly set forth, a man shows whether he has a free, open, receptive mind, or a mind given over to prejudice and preconception. His reception of a truth varies in inverse proportion to the number of prejudices it has to overcome. The greater the number of prejudices it has to overcome the less welcome it is. The truth of the Gospel however disturbs more prejudices, sets in motion a greater number of dislikes, and cuts athwart a greater number of human tendencies, than is the case with truths in science, philosophy, or ethics. It is also of more transcendental importance than any other truth. The manifestation of it tries and tests a man in the most terrible way. By the acceptance of the truth he shows his sincerity and honesty, his nobility of mind and cleanness of conscience, as by the rejection of it he shows that he has no interest in the truth as such.

The Apostle assumes however, that the manifestation of the truth of the Gospel must have its effect on the conscience of every man, just as he assumes that every man has a conscience. Every man has the faculty of moral judgment, and to this faculty in particular the Apostle appeals. If the conscience were aroused, if he could overcome and remove the perversion or the stubbornness of the moral judgment, if he could make the truth manifest to them in such a way as to accomplish this, then his work would almost be done. But whether this was the result or not, it was always his aim. He will manifest the truth, and do this as in the presence of God ; and if the conscience of men remain irresponsive, the Apostle cannot help it. He has done what he could. What can the cause of failure be? It does not lie in the truth, nor in the presentation of the truth by the Apostle. The success of the Gospel in other places, and among the Corinthians themselves, proves that

this is not the reason. Nor does failure arise from the absence of conscience in man. Man has a conscience, to which the truth may come and on which it may act. What then is the hindrance? Why has the truth failed? and why has the conscience remained stubborn and refractory? Not from the nature of the truth, nor from the nature of the conscience, but from the fact that in the case of some these two do never get into contact. There is an affinity between the truth of the Gospel and the conscience; and the contention of the Apostle is, that as soon as truth and conscience fairly meet, their relationship and correspondence are at once demonstrated. The conscience is quickened and enlightened by contact with the truth.

He has however to consider the nature and cause of failure. "But if even it is the case that our Gospel is veiled, it is veiled in them that are perishing." He states a fact, and gives an explanation of it. Failure is so far admitted. The Gospel has not reached the hearts and consciences of some people. Why? Because there is a veil between. The Apostle finds some difficulty in saying what he precisely means. In answer to the objection that the truth has not commended itself to the conscience of every man, he has to assume that the Gospel is veiled. But the assumption is made only for the moment. He immediately proceeds to show that the veil is not on the Gospel, which, like the sun, is always shining, but is on the heart of the "perishing." The truth has been manifested to them, the Gospel has been shining on them, and they have been unable to see it. This does not invalidate the truth or the power of the Gospel; on the contrary, it only serves to show that there are people who are perishing. Inability to see the truth is a proof of the perilous condition in which they are.

Such, says the Apostle, is the fact. He next proceeds to give the explanation. He had in the former section to

deal with the unbelief of the Jews, and to explain why the veil lay on the heart of the Jews "whosoever Moses is read." But the same explanation does not serve here. For the light of the Gospel is so much clearer, brighter, more glorious than the light of the former dispensation, that it ought to have pierced through the veil, and to have reached the conscience. Mere prejudice, or any habit or cause which has its origin in human life alone, will not account for the dense resistance to, and stubborn ignoring of, the truth. It has a deeper origin. The veil is manufactured elsewhere. Its dense folds, which no ray of light can pierce, betray its author. The Apostle does not hesitate; he traces the authorship of the veil to one whose proper work it is. The veil is in them that are perishing; but they are perishing because the god of this world is working in their hearts. "In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of the unbelieving." *ἐν οὗτῳ* describes to us the secret sphere of the working of the god of this world. In the inner life, in the secret place where are the springs and sources of feeling, thought, and action, the god of this present age is working, so that those under his influence are made blind. They cannot see the light. They are unable to apprehend the truth. The god of this world has been successful in his characteristic work. He has veiled the conscience, he has made the intelligence blind, he has deadened the feeling: with the result that the people do not believe, and because they do not believe they are lost.

The god of this world uses for his own ends the men, the things, and the operations of the present life. His aim is to make the Gospel and the glory of Christ of none effect. "That the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should not dawn upon them." Such is the purpose of the god of this world, and such is the loss sustained by those who are blinded. But the description of the work of the god of this world gives the Apostle an



opportunity of describing in full and clear terms the nature and the result of the ministry of light. Three stages in this ministry are clearly seen. The first stage reveals to us the Gospel of the glory of Christ in conflict with the power of the god of this world. There is the struggle of light with darkness. The light seeks to shine, to pierce through the veil drawn over the heart, intelligence, and conscience of men. This first conflict is described in the fourth verse. The second stage arises when the first conflict is over, and the light has so far won the victory as to shine within the heart. It is God who shined *ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ἡμῶν*. In that shining within the heart the light has won a further victory, and has transformed the character, so as to make the man in his turn a source of light. And this is the third stage of the ministry of light, described in the concluding clause of the sixth verse, *πρὸς φωτισμὸν τῆς γνώσεως*, for the shining forth of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Shining on us, shining in us, shining forth from us: such are the three stages in the ministry of light.

It may be well to justify the conclusion by a more detailed exposition. To set forth the more common view of this passage, we may quote from the paraphrase contained in the commentary on Second Corinthians by the late Dean Stanley: "If there be any veil still remaining between us and you, it is on your side, not on ours; it is a veil interposed by the god of this dark and blind and unbelieving world, to whom some surrender themselves—not by the true God, who is represented faithfully to you in our Lord and Master Jesus, whose slaves we are, and to whom alone, not to ourselves, do we wish to subject your minds. He is the true God, who, at the beginning, said, 'Let there be light,' who now pours into your hearts the full blaze of His glory from the face of Jesus Christ" (*St. Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians*, vol. ii., p. 76). Professor Agar Beet thus

sums up the meaning of ver. 6: "While we gaze upon that face as reflected in the Gospel mirror—*i.e.* while we contemplate His character as portrayed in the Gospel,—we behold *in the face of* Christ the greatness of God. That the light which filled Paul's heart was an outshining of God in creative power, and that it had shone forth in him that men might know and wonder at the grandeur of God, moved him to devote himself to the service of man by proclaiming this glorious Gospel" (*The Epistles to the Corinthians*, p. 361). Meyer thus explains: "For God, who had light to shine out of darkness, it is who caused it to shine in our hearts, in order that we should make the knowledge of the Divine glory give light in the presence of Christ. Apart from this figurative knowledge, the sense is: For it is God, the Creator of light, who bestowed on us the spiritual light communicated to us, not that we might retain it for ourselves without further communication, but that we should convey the knowledge of the Divine glory to others, in making this knowledge manifest to them in Christ, whom we teach them to know" (Meyer on *Corinthians*, vol. ii., p. 231, English translation). It seems to us that of these typical expositions, the one who most clearly apprehends the thought of the Apostle is Meyer. Professor Beet, in his able commentary, for the excellence and helpfulness of which we are all so thankful to him, has, it appears to us, not quite followed the sequence of the Apostle's thought, and Dean Stanley seems to have missed it altogether.

For the last clause, beginning *πρὸς φωτισμόν*, is not a mere explanation of the phrase, *ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις*. The shining forth of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ is from those in whose hearts God has shined unto others. The object of the shining is, not to give further light to those in whose hearts God has shined, but to convey to others by means of them the knowledge of

Christ. Meyer thus explains: "In order that the knowledge of the Divine glory may be conveyed and diffused from us to others through the preaching of Christ." This may be held as adequate if we give a wide enough meaning to the word preaching, and make it to mean preaching by living as well as preaching by words; for the bearing of the whole section constrains us to think of character and life, and not merely of speech. We cannot divide speech from life. For the essence of the Apostle's meaning here is, that he preaches what he lives by, and lives by what he preaches.

We shall seek to trace the development of the Apostle's thought. He seeks to make the Gospel of the glory of Christ shine upon the minds of men. This is his lifelong aim and purpose. Of himself he does not think, nor of his own share in the work, until he is forced to do so by the opposition of others. He vindicates himself only in so far as that vindication of his ministry serves for the main purpose of making Christ manifest unto men. "We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake." His business therefore is to preach Christ Jesus as Lord. But he cannot describe the ministry he has received and the object of that ministry without indicating the effects of the Gospel on his own character and life, as well as on the lives of others. Before his mind is the picture of the great conflict between light and darkness. He sees the greatness of the powers which wage war with one another. On the one hand, the powers of evil within the mind and heart of men are reinforced by the power of the "god of this world," whose work Paul conceives to be the blinding of the thoughts of men; on the other hand, is Christ, who is the image of God. From Christ shines forth the glory and the light, which is sufficient to lighten every man. Some indeed do not receive the light. But the light shineth notwithstanding. With a brief description of the powers of light and of darkness, and of

the war they wage with one another in and for possession of the hearts of men, the Apostle turns to the consideration of the next stage of the conflict. Somehow the Gospel of the glory of Christ has pierced the veil, and has come into contact with the conscience. Christ, the image of God, the visible manifestation of the invisible Father, has been manifested to men; and men have received Him, the works of the power of evil notwithstanding.

But with the manifestation of the Son, who is the image of God, there comes the manifestation of the Father. Thus the thought of the Apostle goes simply back from Him who is the image of God to God Himself. The light which shines forth from the Son is the light of the Father. The light which shines in the Christian heart is a light worthy to be compared with the light which sprang out of darkness at the bidding of the Almighty: "Let light be, and light was." So God spake in the making of the world. It is the same creative power which is at work in the hearts of men, removing blindness from the intelligence, weakness from the will, and deadness from the feeling. But as soon as the light has penetrated within the man, and shines within the heart, it transforms and purifies the whole man. As the Son is "the effulgence of the glory of God, and the very image of His substance," so those in whose hearts God does shine become in their own persons 'the light of the world.' The light has shone upon them, has passed into them, and in its progress has so transformed them, that now there shines forth from them the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Into further detail we need not enter at present, nor need we say how many and how liberal are the applications which flow from this view of the passage. How great and high are the responsibilities of a Christian ministry, which is bound to realize this great apostolic ideal!

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