
Address

by

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WORK AMONG THE FREEDMEN

ADDRESS

OF

REV. SAMUEL J. FISHER, D. D.

BEFORE THE

SYNOD OF PENNSYLVANIA

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There are moments when the Church wakens to a new responsibility. In each century God calls upon His people to enter upon new tasks. Again and again He says as of old: "Lo, I have set before thee an open door. I am He that openeth and no man shutteth." Fresh opportunities, greater works, larger influences seem to open up to the individual, the nation and the Church. As Keats described his first reading of Homer:

"Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swings into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when, with eagle eyes,
He stared at the Pacific—and all his men
Looked at each other with a wild surmise,
Silent, upon a peak on Darien."

So God's people see new stars of guidance rise, and seas of service and blessing stretch before them for the triumphs of the Cross. Suddenly and widely God opened to His Church the mission to the Freedmen. That work began at the close of a conflict and amid political changes which shall seem to the future historian to mark the most momentous period of our national life. For many years the door was closed. Lock and bolt and bar shut the Church away from those "fresh fields and pastures new." For two hundred years the shadow of slavery rested on this land. The men who came to this Western continent seeking freedom of thought and action and worship, brought with them crude ideas of liberty for all men. Very slowly did those ideas

broaden. Very slowly did the full vision of Christian right and freedom break on their mind and heart. Very slowly did the principle of man's inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness filter down through the religious and political life of the people. In the Constitutional Convention at the close of the Revolution, the three-fifths representation of slaves was forced upon the free States as a compromise. It seemed a victory, but it was more perilous than a defeat. It kept alive the fact that the slave was still a human being, not an animal; part of the population, not a mere chattel; and ultimately this disproportionate representation led to demands which must be resisted, and fed an ambition which hurled itself to its own destruction. As the years passed, so did the shadow of slavery from the North only to be deepened in the South.

Meanwhile great and thoughtful minds pondered what in Africa Livingstone called "the open sore of the world." Many a slaveholder longed for its removal. The best men of the South were perplexed, both by the difficulties of its banishment and the perils of its continuance. Men had passed out from that older feeling on this subject which made it possible for John Newton, saint and minister, to grieve over the sins of his youth, but never over his career as kidnapper and slaver. Jefferson wrote: "I tremble for my country when I remember that God is just," and more and more it dawned on the public conscience that slavery was a terrible comment on the Preamble to our Declaration of Independence.

Meanwhile some godly men and women were striving to meet their responsibility toward the slaves in their possession. The teaching of the Bible, the counsel and precept bore much fruit. Thus did the faithful preaching of many a minister soothe these burdened and enslaved hearts, and bring to them the great truths of God and His Gospel, and the life to come, to which the negro mind seems so universally open. But it could not be denied that these efforts were small and ineffectual. The great laws of morality never could be fixed in a race to which marriage was denied, chastity made a mockery, theft blamed, tho' there was no right to property; a race which saw their parents and husbands and wives and children swiftly parted and sold away; a race admitted to the greatest intimacies and privacies, and yet shut out forever from redress of wrong, from advancement or hope. Meanwhile men struggled with the problem. Then public conscience grew more sensitive and alert. Discussion intensified the feelings of friend and foe. Men came to call it "the irrepressible conflict," and Lincoln declared, as with a prophet's power, "that no nation can endure half-slave and half-free—a house divided against itself cannot stand." Into the maelstrom of debate and discussion the great churches of the land were drawn, and some

were led to such a declaration of principles, such a condemnation of the system as rent them in twain—creating chasms of difference which still mark the upheaval and conflict. Then came a period of fratricidal war. It may be quite true that slavery's preservation or destruction was not an avowed motive of the parties to the conflict. It may be quite true that emancipation was long held in abeyance, and forced into prominence only by the necessities of the hour; but the men who gave their lives and fortunes for the cause they upheld knew in their hearts and recognized in their songs that the power and continuance of slavery were at stake. And this removal of slavery, this deliverance to the captive race, was the recognized result of the war. When the Scottish-Americans who fought for the Union raised in the little cemetery at Edinburgh a statue to Lincoln, they placed at his feet a negro from whom chains and fetters were broken, to point the moral of the wondrous tale of this patriot and martyr.

Then the Church awoke to its new and enlarged duty when the bells of peace rang, and the nation bound up its wounds, and hushed the sounds of strife. As to Paul resting near Troas after protracted labors, there came the vision of the Macedonian and the cry, so to the Church there rose this vision of a race in all the gloom of poverty, ignorance and superstition. Their lack of resources, their unguided condition, the antagonisms of the old society under which they had so long been held, gave them a claim upon every Christian heart. Every heart which had learned Paul's principle, "I am a debtor," felt the responsibility of God's people to give the Gospel to these poor.

So the Presbyterian Church established the Committee of Missions to the Freedmen. A brief historical statement is in place here, condensing facts of greatest interest.

BEGINNINGS OF PRESBYTERIAN WORK.

The Presbyterian Church, North, began missionary work among the negroes of the South fully a year before the close of the Civil War. Two committees were at work under the direction of the General Assembly (O. S.) as early as 1864—one with headquarters at Indianapolis, and the other at Philadelphia. The work of these two committees from necessity was confined by military lines, and was chiefly in connection with military and "contraband" camps and hospitals. In May, 1865, the General Assembly meeting in Pittsburgh, united these committees under one general committee, entitled the "The General Assembly's Committee on Freedmen." It met by order of the Assembly in the lecture room of the First Church, Pittsburgh, and was organized June 22d, 1865.

Before the reunion there was another work similar in character and purpose with headquarters in New York, carried on as a "Freedman's Department," in connection with the Presbyterian Committee of Home Missions (N. S.) This Freedmen's Department existed only two years, making its second annual report in 1870. When the two Assemblies united in 1870, the work among the Freedmen as carried on from New York and Pittsburgh was consolidated and a new committee appointed. This new committee was organized by direction of the Reunited General Assembly, June 10th, 1870, in Pittsburgh, Pa.

This committee continued to work without change of plan or reorganization for 12 years; but the question of ownership of property, necessary to the work, and the handling of bequests made it evident that it would be better to have the committee incorporated. In 1882 the Assembly at Springfield, Ill., sanctioned the change and the committee obtained a charter September 16th, 1882, and became a corporate body, under the name of "The Board of Missions for Freedmen of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America."

It is one of the advantages of these anniversaries and celebrations that they permit us to review the past, to mark the stepping-stones of progress, to recognize the mistakes, the changes in sentiment, the widening of knowledge through experience, the development of methods. The very entrusting of this work to a committee shows the Church had small idea of its greatness, and was feeling its way to the measure of its duties. At the outset this work was regarded as merely a branch of Home Missions, and from time to time the superficial acquaintance with the problems of the mission has led the looker-on to imagine it might well be so considered still. But experience has taught us that it is a unique, a remarkable, an essentially distinct, field for the work of the Church. It is a part of Home Missions only because it lies within our country, makes use of the English language, and develops its population into American citizenship. Aside from these surface characteristics it lies apart from all the ordinary work of Home Missions. It calls for special, laborious, and profoundly wise treatment. The assimilation of a class of immigrants into religious and political relationship offers no such problem and presents no such task as does this transformation and elevation of the Freedmen.

Let us consider some of the special obstacles, and then the encouragement which these Missions present to the worker. Aside from the fact that these people were born upon this soil, they were thoroughly heathen as a mass. We shall give all honor to those Christian masters and mistresses, those conscientious pastors who sought to instill into these ignorant natures the precepts of Christ. But experience shows us that

among the great mass of those four million of freed slaves there was no real religious life or knowledge. There was no training of conscience, no sense of responsibility, no appreciation of the fundamentals. Family life and training never had been known. Licentiousness was venial. Truthfulness, honesty, the power to appreciate the moral law, had never been developed. Their very religion was divorced from morality. It was emotion unsustained by law or truth. It could not be otherwise. God did not reverse His great laws of the development of character, or the progress of moral conceptions simply because, after centuries of neglect, we paid in blood and tears the price of oppression and set this people free. All religious work among this people has to be from the ground up—it has to meet all the mistraining, all the ingrained and inborn influences of a false relationship and example. Their very virtues are their defects. The endurance, the patience, the laughter, the song, have too often led to indolence and the carelessness of the morrow, which is as destructive to morality as it is to civilization. Then, too, this work has had to mark out its own methods and create its own resources. Churches have had to be built, schools erected, a continued oversight maintained. It is among a people unqualified by its past for variety of occupation that this work goes on. Hence there is little opportunity for progress, slow development of the individual genius, and hence a poverty of life which, unless carefully watched and resolutely combated, will continue them in their helplessness and inertness.

The work also was prosecuted in close contact with a people who could not easily adjust themselves to the new order of things. There arose, as there was bound to arise between an ignorant and long-debased race suddenly freed, and dreaming of a false equality, and an impetuous people, conscious of its superiority, burdened with its losses, embittered by disappointment, a friction and hostility which complicated the problem. All this reacted upon the work of the Church and made the necessity all the greater for tact and patience and prayer.

Nor were these obstacles lessened by the acts of the Federal Government or the wrongs of politicians. As in foreign lands, the missionary must contend with the evils created by his own godless countryman, and meet the sneer at his own religion, forged and pointed by the nominal religion of the selfish and unbelieving, so the work of missions among the Freedmen shared in the complications created by others. The acts of reconstruction, the giving of suffrage, the wisdom or the folly of the legislation which sought to repay the negro by citizenship for his years of debasement need not be discussed. Only this is to be remembered, that those conse-

quences were tremendous in their effect upon this work. They alienated thousands of sympathetic and loving hearts. They threw thousands of the indifferent into the attitude of bitter opposition. The ambitions and lusts of this emotional and untaught race created among the whites a harshness of feeling which for the time resisted all interest or appeal. Under this increased difficulty the work of missions went on. Its workers met social ostracism, the contempt of bitter natures, and though as truly cultivated, as nobly born, as their associates, and animated only by the most generous and saintly and patriotic purpose, they bore in their daily life this antagonism and blame for the mistakes of Congress and the self-inflicted wrongs of the South. What problem of Foreign Missions has had greater elements of difficulty? Is not the moulding of our immigrant populations into a worthy citizenship and a true religiousness an easy task beside this? And here, as we review those days, let it be recorded that these missionaries among the Freedmen met all these difficulties, suffered gladly and in silence, misunderstood, isolated, despised, forgotten, with an ever-increasing interest in the work, and a deepening desire to lead these hearts to the truth as it is in Jesus. Forgotten! No! for when the Lord comes to make up His book of remembrance He shall write there the names of patient workers, whose names shall shine when earth's inscriptions to its heroes and leaders shall have faded forever.

There were some special encouragements to the work. First, as a people familiar with our language, they were ready for the English Bible and missionary. Then, they are naturally a reverent and believing race. Atheism has never been their peril. Some kind of belief in God has been their cheer and support in the weariness, their pole star in the wilderness wanderings and captivity. They are teachable, open to kindly suggestion, and susceptible to noble ambitions. The very qualities which have so often degenerated into reckless assertion and discourtesy, or worse, are possibly the foundations of a wise growth and a longing for education. They are open to example, docile and eager for every suggestion of a higher life. Carefully taught, they often reveal the strongest appreciation of all they have received, and develop into the most earnest workers for the elevation of their own race. They have responded to the suggestion of self-support, and in the past year contributed \$38,946 toward the support of the Gospel in their own midst, sending, besides, \$1,505 to the various benevolent boards of the Church. Not few is the number among them who have given their all to Christ and His work in gratitude to God for His unspeakable gift.

It was this broadening view of the work, obtained by experience, that the lifting of this race to a Christian life and experience was no brief enterprise, not a work of one day or

two, that led the Church in 1882 to incorporate the committee as a Board and widen its importance and claim upon the Church. Under the new charter the Board educates teachers and preachers; maintains ministers in their work and teachers in their schools; builds churches, schoolhouses, seminaries, colleges and dormitories; prescribes courses of study; elects professors and trustees; supervises the condition of buildings, their renewal and insurance; provides all necessary utensils and furnishings of the boarding departments; receives monthly financial statements from all schools, and audits all bills, and requires careful reports from each and all of its missionaries. The detail and extent of this work has not been generally known, and under the laudable desire for economy and consolidation, the General Assembly has twice appointed committees to inquire to the propriety of consolidating this board with that of Home Missions. Both committees reported negatively and the last, in 1889, recommended unanimously against consolidation (adding that "the conclusions reached were opposite to their original opinions"). Although the Board has only acquired property since 1882, it now owns school property to the value of \$500,000 and church property to the amount of \$60,000, while the entire property subject to its care and oversight will amount to \$1,000,000. It is proper here to make especial mention of the Secretaries whose work has been so productive. Drs. E. F. Hatfield and S. C. Logan, before the reunion, gave the work a great impetus, and Dr. Logan has since continued his great interest and exercised his influence in its behalf. Dr. A. C. McClelland for eleven years labored most devotedly. He was followed by Dr. R. H. Allen, who, possessing the natural gifts of an orator and advocate, was also specially fitted for this work by a youth spent amidst slavery and a perfect acquaintance with the race. His successor, Rev. E. P. Cowan, D. D., is also admirably qualified for all the needs of this work, by a boyhood passed in a slave State, as well as by an unflinching sympathy, a large knowledge of the field, a fine executive ability and the power through all the difficulties of the work to see its greatness and its possibilities. It is but just to say that, while the Board has had two very efficient Treasurers in the past, Rev. Drs. Gibson and Beacom, Dr. Cowan now combines much of this work with his secretaryship. Dr. Cowan's work, like those of his predecessors, has not been merely clerical and official, but deeply appreciative of individual fields, the expectations of the Church and the special difficulties, and all of his work has been suffused with the light of a personal acquaintance with the individual missionary and teacher.

Though there have been an advance and enlargement since the beginning, the board still follows the ideal method of missions adopted by our Church.

Thus, 1, it regards as its first and fundamental mission to give this people the Gospel. It believes that the greatest need for time and eternity is a true conception of God, a knowledge of His law and His salvation and a regenerated heart. It would lay the ax at the root of the tree, and though, as we shall see, it is in hearty sympathy with all physical means of development and all intellectual growth, it relies first upon the truth which can make of the sinner a new man in Christ Jesus. Your workers and teachers are pre-eminently missionaries, leading these hearts up to a fear of God, a penitence for sin, a sincere belief in Christ, and then the things which accompany salvation. Your Board believes that its great work is the evangelization of this people, the giving to them of the full Gospel, that truth which has among other peoples been the foundation of a new life and an enduring civilization. So it establishes churches, forms parochial schools and assists in the building of houses of worship. By the most careful oversight and suggestion it has ever sought to develop this higher church life and training and make this the most important result of all its effort. And here it feels certain that it occupies a vantage ground from which it can appeal to every generous heart. No matter what the ultimate verdict may be upon the equality or inequality of this race with others, no matter what the final judgment may be upon the intellectual or political questions, this is clear, that here are immortal souls, here are men and women who need a Savior, who can and must be saved by the blood of Christ, who are in the deepest darkness and ruin until they come out into His marvellous light. This is clear, that to raise this people to a worthy life, to give marriage a sanctity, home a power, fatherhood and motherhood a stage above the brute, to give family training its blessing, to make all toil a duty and a sphere for the display of every virtue, we must give them the Gospel in its fullness. If the Church realizes this, and devoutly fulfills its Master's command, it can labor on while men debate the future of the race in tones of hope or despair. It cares not whether some unwise member of that very race employs his own talents and ability to prove his race has neither talents or ability. Like Nehemiah, it is too busy with its divine task to stop and listen while some popular writer appeals to prejudice and passion to say, "the leopard cannot change his spots, nor the Ethiopian his skin;" for it sees that God is no respecter of persons, and that beneath the red or yellow or black skin there may be a heart made white in the blood of the Lamb. Onesimus may still be the servant of Philemon, but he is now "a brother in the Lord."

2. But the Presbyterian church believes that for the true reception, comprehension and use of the Gospel education is necessary. Ignorance is the mother of superstition—not of

religion. The mere possession of the few first principles of this Gospel will never suffice to make broad, earnest, complete Christians. And it is true that as the entrance of God's word giveth light, it impels men to seek the light. So the Church entered at once upon the education of the children and the youth. In the lack of public schools it established parochial schools and academies, and there it has given an ever-broadening education, pervaded by our religious faith. As time passes on, and the South enlarges its public school system, the Board is glad to be relieved of some of this responsibility, and it looks with pleasure upon the noble and generous efforts of those thoughtful citizens of North Carolina and Alabama who are bending every power to provide such instruction. But if relieved from this vast responsibility, the Board will only turn to a more thorough development of its academies, its seminaries and colleges. Here are gathered the hope of the Church and the State. Here are gathered the boys and girls from every condition of ignorance and poverty as well as of progress. Here they are brought into hourly contact with refined and intelligent Christian men and women, subject to every elevating and ennobling influence, taught the right use of each power of mind and heart, and moulded to desires for purity and uprightness and duty such as neither in the home or public school are they likely to receive. From this prolonged association with affectionate and thoughtful teachers these boys and girls go back to homes and communities with conceptions of life and duty, of industry and service, of cleanliness and conduct as make them the leaven of their associations, the salt which stops the decay. Under these intimate and daily relations with such teachers they gain not only new and higher ideas of their responsibility, but also a training for every line of work—a preparation for every task. They are trained in mind and hand. Industrial training is everywhere emphasized, but along with it that development of the mind which makes manual labor and skill more valuable. A member of the Board has recently presented one of our schools with a farm of 200 acres, stocked and ready at a cost of \$5,000. Comparisons may be odious and often are unnecessary, but it is well for some of you to realize that in a true calculation, the industrial results produced by the schools of the Board equal that of Hampton and Tuskegee at one-half the cost. These schools and academies are the sources whence shall come the trained and regenerated fathers and mothers—the educated men and women of the future. In these schools they gain such ideas and examples and elevating influences as no public school system attempts to give. They are continually surrounded with that religious influence which too often the home, the community and the press do not create. No common school education, low or high, is sufficient to train and govern these

restless, ambitious youth, just emerging from barbarism, like Milton's lion, pawing their way slowly out of the soil, and make them honest, useful God-fearing members of the community. It is a truism that education does not create morality—a truism sadly illustrated by the revelations of character to-day in St. Louis, Minneapolis, Philadelphia and these twin cities—the revelations of our own legislature, where the appropriation to the Western Institution for the Deaf and Dumb was refused because the managers would not give a bribe of \$10,000. Education is valuable only as it is controlled by the truth, and the Christian Church believes that man is to love God with his mind as well as his heart. The Church has no more encouraging lines of work than in these academies and seminaries. Manned by most devoted and capable faculties which are intensely interested in the elevation of his race, no work anywhere is conducted with greater care or economy, or with higher devotion to God's will, or more satisfying results. This is not the language of mere enthusiasm, for I am sure that no Christian man or woman has ever visited one of these seminaries, inspected its work, studied its motives and aims and sought its results in body and character, without a heightened interest—a deepened respect for the ability, spirit and consecration, and a belief that however great is the problem of this race, this effort of Christian education is to be one of the greatest factors in its solution.

3. But it was borne in upon the church that it must not stop at rudimentary education. Though it provide so much for the mass, it must remember the needs of the choice and higher few. If it is to have Christian teachers from this people for its multiplying schools; if it is to create a higher class who as business or professional men shall be fitted for its eldership, its Sabbath school work and as trustees of its institutions, it must make it possible that the brighter and more talented shall find an education possible. More especially it must provide such ministers and evangelists, such pastors and teachers as shall hold the respect of the growing minds, "and allure to higher worlds and lead the way." A trained and consecrated ministry is an absolute necessity to this people. The terrible results in superstition and immorality of an emotional religion and an ignorant evangelist, the degradation to which those blind leaders of the blind assist has been the mock of the humorist and the grief of the wise. Surely nothing can be more evident to the intelligent members of our church than this, that if these people are to be religiously trained and advanced from grace to grace, and if white missionaries are not always to lead them, the institutions which provide such leaders and which educate the finer minds for every special work should be the object of the wise and generous fostering care of the Church. Then, too, it behooves the Church to rise to

this enlarged responsibility, that, having men and women fitted and ready for the work, saying: "Here am I, send me," having everywhere fields asking for such leaders, fields promising rich results for Christians, it shall provide the Board with such resources as shall carry the gospel into new fields, and provide for some of its workers a support which shall free them from the stings of poverty, and with a heart less burdened with worldly associations make them more able to win souls to Christ. It is one of the most perplexing joys of this work—an embarrassment of its riches—that everywhere the field is open and ready—everywhere the cry is heard, "Come and help us." We do not stand at the door and knock. We do not wait while old religions wane and prejudices decline. But everywhere churches might be planted and a blessed work begun if even the suggestions of the Assembly were met by the gifts and the prayers of our church.

It is not without a purpose that the condition and future of the negro in America is one of the questions that will not down. It is one of the anxieties of the nation, the theme of patriots and demagogues and the madness of the crowd. To some it will seem so hopeless as to create indifference,—to others it appears a work with a mighty claim upon every patriot and citizen and Christian. The point of view—the historical experience—the confidence in God, makes all the difference.

Dr. Guthrie tells us that shortly after coming to Edinburgh to work, especially among the poor and ignorant, he stood one dark and misty afternoon upon the bridge which spans the Cowgate, and, while he thought of the sweet country parish he had left, he looked with troubled and depressed heart upon the ragged and forlorn multitude below him who were to be the parish in which he labored. And as his heart sank he heard a voice behind him, and turning, saw Dr. Chalmers looking at the same dreary scene. "This great and good man knew I had accepted an Edinburgh charge mainly for the purpose of trying what the parochial system could do toward Christianizing the heathendom beneath our feet. Contemplating the scene for a little in silence, all at once, with his broad, Luther-like face glowing with enthusiasm he waved his arm to exclaim, 'A beautiful field, sir; a very fine field of operation!'" Many a man looking out on this race, which from 5,000,000 has increased to almost 9,000,000, feels the burden and the gloom. But, he who feels the great spiritual power and vigor of the gospel shall catch the enthusiasm of Chalmers and exclaim "A beautiful field!" Wider than many realize are the results sought in the elevation and Christianizing of this people. It is not only for their own sakes, we labor, for their own rise to use and blessing as citizens. It is for the safety of the peoples among whom they dwell, for the

protection of the white populations from cruelty, from immorality and the fearful temptations of licentiousness. No people, however noble their traditions or vigorous in character can dwell uninjured and uncontaminated amid an inferior people untaught and indifferent to morality. It is thus that the elevation of the negro is of unspeakable importance to every patriot and lover of his own race. It does not matter whether there shall be found any who shall meet the question of equality with the Anglo-Saxon. Whether there shall be another Othello, another Dumas, another Toussaint L'Ouverture, another Douglas concerns us not. The Church of Jesus Christ has a message for every race, a help for the lowliest and weakest. Out of the great struggle of our country there rose the hymn which inspired men on to every sacrifice:

"In the beauty of the lilies
Christ was born across the sea—
As He died to make men holy
Let us die to make them free."

We who have come out into a greater liberty must bring to men, white or black, and black as well as white, this higher freedom, as our Redeemer said: "The truth shall make you free."