

THE LIVING PULPIT,

OR

EIGHTEEN SERMONS

BY EMINENT LIVING DIVINES

OF

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH.

WITH

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE EDITOR,

BY GEO. W. BETHUNE, D. D.

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CATHOLICITY OF THE GOSPEL.

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Is he God of the Jews only, and not of the Gentiles also? ROMANS iii. 29.

WE are so familiar with the truth contained in these words that we do not appreciate its importance. Accustomed to the varied beauties of the earth, we behold its manifold wonders without emotion; we seldom even raise our eyes to look at the gaudious canopy of heaven, which every night is spread over our heads. The blind, however, when suddenly restored to sight, behold with ecstasy what we regard with indifference. Thus the truth that God is not a national God, not the God of any one tribe or people, but the God and Father of all men, and that the Gospel is designed and adapted to all mankind, however little it may affect us, filled the apostles with astonishment and delight. They were slow in arriving at the knowledge of this truth; they had no clear perception of it until after the day of Pentecost; the effusion of the Spirit which they then received produced a most remarkable change in their views and feelings. Before that event, they

were Jews; afterwards, they were Christians; before, they applied all the promises to their own nation; the only Jerusalem of which they had any idea was the city where David dwelt; the only temple of which they could form a conception was that in which they were accustomed to worship. But when they received the anointing of the Holy Ghost, the scales fell from their eyes; their nation sank and the Church rose on their renovated sight; the Jerusalem that now is, disappeared when they beheld the New Jerusalem descending out of heaven; the temple on Mount Zion was no longer glorious, by reason of the excelling glory of that temple which is the habitation of God by his Spirit; old things passed away, all things became new; what they had mistaken for the building proved to be the scaffolding; the sacrifices, the incense, the pompous ritual of the old economy, which they had so long regarded as the substance and the end, were found to be but shadows. What was the blood of bulls and of goats to men who had looked upon the blood of Him who, with an eternal Spirit, offered himself unto God? What were priests and Levites to the great High Priest, Jesus, the Son of God? What was the purifying of the flesh secured by the sprinkling the ashes of a heifer, to the eternal redemption secured by Him who is a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedec? What was access to the outer court of a temple, in which even the symbol of the divine presence was concealed by a veil, to access to God himself by the Spirit? What were the tribes of Israel coming up to Jerusalem, to the long procession of nations coming to the New Jeru-

saalem, and kings to the brightness of her rising; the multitudes from Midian and Ephraim; they too from Sheba, bringing their gifts with them; the flocks of Kedar and the rams of Nebaioth; the sons of strangers and the forces of the Gentiles, hastening to that city whose walls are salvation, and whose gates are praise?

This change in the views of the apostles seems to have been almost instantaneous. While Christ was upon earth, they were constantly misapprehending his doctrines; even in the night in which he was betrayed, there was a contention among them who should be the greatest in his kingdom. But as soon as they received the baptism of the Holy Ghost they ceased to speak and act like Jews, and announced a religion for the whole world.

I. In the general proposition, that the Gospel is designed and adapted for all mankind, there are several important truths involved. The most comprehensive is that contained in the text: God is the God of the Gentiles as well as of the Jews. It is obvious that the Jews generally, and the apostles, as Jews, entertained very erroneous views on this until they were enlightened by the Holy Ghost; they mistook even the spirit of the old dispensation. It is true that Jehovah chose their nation for a peculiar people, and that he was their God in a sense in which he was not the God of the heathen. He revealed himself to them as he did not unto the world; he instituted for them a system of religious observances; sent them his prophets to declare his will; exercised over them a special providence, and constituted them, in the strictest sense, a theocracy.

There was nothing, however, in the Old Testament which justified the proud and self-righteous spirit which the Jews manifested towards the heathen; they were not authorized to look upon them as reprobates shut out from the hope of salvation, as unworthy of having even the offer of the true religion made to them. The surprise expressed by the apostles that God had granted unto the Gentiles repentance unto life, that the gate of heaven was wide enough to admit more than the descendants of Abraham, shows how much they had misconceived the spirit of their own religion.

Their great mistake, however, was in supposing that the exclusive spirit, as far as it did in fact belong to the old economy, was meant to be perpetual. They mistook a temporary for a permanent arrangement, and supposed that the glory of the theocracy under the Messiah involved nothing beyond the exaltation and extended dominion of their own nation. They were blind to the plainest declarations of their own Scriptures, which foretold that God would pour out his Spirit upon all flesh; that the Messiah was to be a light to the Gentiles, to make known the salvation of God to the ends of the earth; and that the sons of the stranger were to have in his kingdom a name and a place, better than those of sons and daughters. Even the affecting parables of our Lord, designed to rebuke the narrow spirit of his disciples, failed to make any adequate impression on their minds. Though they were told that the prodigal son was to be restored to his father's house, clothed with the best robe, and rejoiced over with peculiar joy, they understood it not.

It is not to be supposed that the ancient Jews conceived of Jehovah as a local Deity, confined in his essence to any one place, or restricted in his authority to any one people. From the beginning they had been taught that he was the Creator of all things; that he filled heaven and earth; that he was almighty, doing his pleasure among the armies of heaven and the inhabitants of the earth; but they believed him to be indifferent to the welfare of other nations; they did not know that he had purposes of mercy for the Gentiles, as well as for themselves. When they called Jehovah their God, they meant not only that he was the God whom they acknowledged, but that he belonged exclusively to them, that they monopolized his favour, and were the sole heirs of his kingdom. What Christ taught them by his Word and Spirit was, that God was as favourably inclined to the Gentiles as to the Jews; that the same Lord was rich toward all who called upon him; that there existed no reason in the Divine mind, why the heathen should not be fellow heirs and partakers of the grace of the Gospel, why they might not be fellow citizens of the saints and of the household of God. This is what is meant, when it is said he is the God of the Gentiles as well as of the Jews; he stands in the same general relation to both; he is as favourable to the one as to the other; as ready to receive one as the other; as willing to receive and save the one as the other. Christ came not as the minister of the circumcision only, but that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy, as it is written: Rejoice, ye Gentiles, with his people; praise the Lord all ye Gentiles, laud

him all ye people. This is the ground, brethren, on which we stand. We are in the Church, not by courtesy of man; not by toleration or sufferance; not as strangers or proselytes, but as fellow citizens and fellow heirs. We that were not beloved, are now beloved; we that were not his people, are now the people of God, though Abraham be ignorant of us, and though Israel acknowledge us not. It is this glorious truth, that God is the God of the Gentiles, that expands the Gospel and makes it a religion suited for the whole world. It is no longer the sluggish Jordan flowing through its narrow channel, it is a sea of glory which spreads from pole to pole. The mercy and love of God are commensurate with his ubiquity; whenever he looks down on man and says, My children, they may look up to him and say, Our Father! Praise him, therefore, O ye Gentiles, laud him, O ye people, for Israel's God is our God and our Redeemer.

II. Again, the proposition that the Gospel is designed and adapted for all mankind, supposes the spiritual nature of Christ's kingdom; that is, that the service which is now required is a spiritual, in opposition to a ritual and ceremonial service; that the government of that kingdom is a spiritual government, and that its blessings are spiritual blessings. The old economy was, from its ritual and ceremonial character, incapable of including all nations. Without the shedding of blood there was no remission, but sacrifices could be offered only at Jerusalem; there was the temple, the priest, and the altar; there was the symbol of the Divine presence; thither the tribes were required to repair three times

every year. Innumerable cases were constantly occurring, which rendered attendance at the place where God had recorded his name absolutely necessary. As the Jewish ritual could not be observed out of Jerusalem, it was impossible that the whole world should be subjected to that form of worship. Those who were afar off were without an offering, without a priest, without access to God. The lamentations of David, when absent from the court of God, his earnest longings after liberty of access to the place where God revealed his glory, show how intimately the happiness of the people of God was connected with the services of the sanctuary. Our Lord announced a radical change in the whole economy of religion, and one which disenthralled it from all these trammels, when he said to the woman of Samaria, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh and now is, when ye neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, shall worship the Father; the true worshippers shall worship the Father in Spirit and in truth, for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit, and they that worship him, must worship in Spirit and in truth. It was here taught, not only that the worship of God was no longer to be confined to any one place, but also that it was no longer to be ceremonial but spiritual. It is no longer necessary to go up to Jerusalem, in order to draw near to God, but wherever two or three are met together in his name, there is he in the midst of them. The temple, in which his people now worship, is no longer a temple made with hands, but that spiritual temple made without hands. Its pillars rest on the four corners of the earth, and it

surmounts the heavens; the southern African, the northern Greenlander, the innumerable company of angels, and the general Assembly and Church of the first born, are all included in its ample courts. The sacrifice which is now offered is not the blood of bulls and of goats, but the precious blood of Christ, as a lamb slain from the foundation of the world. The incense which now ascends before the throne of God, comes not from brazen censers, but from living hearts.

Again, under the old economy the Church had a visible head, who dwelt at Jerusalem, by whom the annual atonement was made for the sins of the people. He was their intercessor before God; the medium of communication between God and his people; the arbiter and director of the whole congregation. Those, therefore, who were at a distance from the High Priest were necessarily cut off from many of the most important advantages of the theocracy. Under the Gospel all this is changed. The head of the Church, the High Priest of our profession is no longer a man dwelling in any one city, but Jesus, the Son of God, who by the one offering up of himself hath for ever perfected them that are sanctified; who is every where accessible, every where present to guide and comfort his people, and who ever lives to make intercession for them. The believer cannot be where Christ is not. At any time and in every place he may approach his throne, he may embrace his knees or wash his feet with tears, and hear him say, Son, or daughter, be of good cheer, thy sins are forgiven thee.

Once more, as to this point: the blessings which

the Gospel offers being spiritual are adapted to all mankind. The benefits connected with the old economy were in a great measure external and temporal. This idea the apostle expresses by saying its rites could avail only to the purifying of the flesh. Considered in themselves they could do no more than secure for those who observed them the benefits of the external theocracy. Those who were circumcised became members of the Hebrew commonwealth; those who kept the law, had the promise of fruitful seasons; those who had forfeited their right of access to the sanctuary, had it restored by offering a sacrifice; those who were defiled by any ceremonial uncleanness, might be purified within the temple by the officiating priest. Apart, therefore, from its reference to the Gospel, the blessings secured by that dispensation were exclusively of this external character, for it was impossible that its rites should take away sin. These benefits were not only of little value, but they were necessarily confined to a limited sphere; they were incapable of being extended to all mankind. How low must have been the expectations of those who considered the Messiah's kingdom as nothing but an enlargement of this system. How complete a revolution must it have produced in all their views and feelings to discover that Christ's kingdom was not of this world; that the blessings which it promised were not worldly prosperity, not a pompous ritual or splendid temple, not dominion over other nations, but the forgiveness of sin, the renewal of the heart, reconciliation with God and eternal life. These are blessings, not only of infinite value, but such as are

confined to no one locality. They are not more needed by one set of men than another; they are incapable of being monopolized, for they constitute an inheritance which is rather increased than lessened by the number of the heirs. We say then that the Gospel dispensation is catholic, or designed for the whole world, because it is a spiritual dispensation; the worship which it requires may be as acceptably offered in one place as another; the head of this new covenant is every where present and every where accessible, and the blessings which he confers are suited to the necessities of all mankind.

III. Another point of no less importance, is, that the righteousness of Christ, by which these blessings of pardon, regeneration and eternal life are secured, is such as to lay an ample foundation for the offer of salvation to all men. This is a point with regard to which the minds of the apostles underwent a great change. Under the old dispensation, the High Priest, as the representative of the people, made a confession of their sins, imposing them on the head of the victim, and made reconciliation by sprinkling the blood upon the mercy seat. By that atonement the sins of the people, considered as committed against the external theocracy, were forgiven, and the blessings of that dispensation were actually secured. It is obvious that this was an atonement limited in design to that people, having no reference to any other nation. It was limited also in its value, having no intrinsic worth, but deriving all its efficacy from the sovereign appointment. It was also limited in its very nature; being attached to a national covenant, it was in its nature available to

none who were not included in that covenant; it was a Jewish sacrifice, designed for Jews, belonging to a covenant made with Jews, and securing blessings in which other nations had no concern.

In complete contrast with all this, we know, in the first place, that the work of Christ was not limited in design to any one nation. Christ himself said, he laid down his life for his sheep, and other sheep he had which were not of that fold; in this sense it is said he is the propitiation for our sins, and not for our sins only, but for the sins of the whole world; or, as the same apostle expresses the same truth in another place, Jesus died not for that nation only, but that he should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad.

In the second place, there is no limit to be placed to the value of Christ's righteousness; its worth is not to be measured by the duration or intensity of the Saviour's sufferings, but by the dignity of his person. In contrasting the sacrifices of the Old Testament with that of the New, the apostle says the former were inefficacious because mere animals were offered; that of Christ was effectual, once for all, because he offered up himself. It is the nature of the offering that determines its value; and as the dignity of Christ's person is infinite, so is the value of his sacrifice; if it suffices for the salvation of one man, it is sufficient for the salvation of all; it is incapable of increase or diminution. The light of the sun is not measured by the number of those who enjoy its brightness; millions can see by it as well as a single individual; it is not the less because many are affected by it, nor would it be the greater

though only one enjoyed it. So also the righteousness of Christ is in value infinite and inexhaustible, because it is the righteousness of God.

In the third place, the righteousness of Christ is in its nature suited to all men. As the annual propitiation under the old dispensation belonged to the covenant formed with the whole people of Israel, and was in its nature suited to all included within that covenant; so the righteousness of Christ fulfils the conditions of that covenant under which all mankind are placed. He perfectly obeyed the precepts and endured the penalty of that law by which all mankind are bound; hence his righteousness, being what was due from every man, is in its nature suited to each and every man. As the work of Christ, as connected with the covenant of grace, has special reference to all included in that covenant, and effectually secures their salvation; but as in performing the stipulations of that covenant, he fulfilled the conditions of the covenant of works which all mankind had broken, his work is, in its nature, applicable to all who are under the covenant made with Adam.

Inasmuch, then, as the righteousness of Christ is not limited in the design of God to any one nation; as it is of infinite value; and as it is, in its nature, equally applicable to all men, we are authorized to go to Jew and Gentile, to barbarians, Scythians, bond and free, yea, to every creature, with the offer of salvation. If any man refuses the offer, his blood will be upon his own head; he perishes not for want of a righteousness, but because he rejects that which is of infinite value and suited to all his necessities.

The gospel, therefore, is not trammelled; we can go with it round the world, and announce to every creature that Christ has died the just for the unjust; that he has wrought out an everlasting righteousness, which any man may accept and plead before the throne of God.

IV. Again, the catholic character of the gospel is apparent from its offering salvation on conditions suited to all men. It does not require us to ascend into heaven, or to go down to the abyss; its demands are simple, intelligible and reasonable; it requires nothing peculiar to any sex, age, or class of men; it is not a religion for the rich in distinction from the poor, or for the poor in distinction from the rich; it is not a system of philosophy intelligible only to the learned, nor is it a superstition which none but the ignorant can embrace. It is truth, simple and transcendent; in all that is essential, intelligible to a child, and yet the object of admiration and wonder to angels. It does not suspend our salvation on any particular ecclesiastical connection; it does not require us to decide between conflicting churches which has the true succession; nor does it make grace and salvation to depend on the ministration or will of man; it is not the religion of any one sect or church, and nothing but the wickedness can equal the folly of the attempt to confine the grace of God to the shallow channel of a particular ecclesiastical organization. What the gospel demands is nigh thee, in thy heart and in thy mouth; that is, the word of faith which we preach, that if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and believe in thy heart that God hath raised him

from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. Here, then, are terms of salvation which are suited equally to all men, the Jew and the Greek, the wise and the unwise, the bond and the free.

V. Again, the rule of life prescribed by the Gospel is adapted to all men, in every age and in every part of the world; it is the great law of love, which commends itself to every man's conscience, and is suited to all the relations of domestic, social, and political life. It is a principle which disturbs nothing that is good, which can amalgamate with nothing that is wrong, which admits of being acted out under all circumstances, and of accommodating itself to all states of society, and to all forms of government.

How free, how catholic, how pure, how elevated is the spirit of the Gospel, which reveals God as an universal Father; which makes known a religion confined to no locality, burdened with no expensive ritual, conferring on those who embrace it, not worldly distinctions, but the spiritual blessings of pardon and holiness; which reveals a righteousness sufficient for all, and suited for all; which offers that righteousness to all on the simplest of all conditions, that of sincerely accepting it; whose moral precepts and principles of religious duty, and of ecclesiastical organization admit of being carried out with equal purity and power, in all ages and in all parts of the world.

1. The catholic character of the Gospel, which we have now been considering, affords one of the strongest arguments for its divine origin. No reli-

gion can be true which is not suited to God as its author, and to man for whom it is intended. The Gospel is suited to God because it supposes him to be, as he in fact is, not a national God, but the God and Father of all men; and it is suited to men because it meets not the wants of any one class, nor any one class of wants, but all the wants of every class, tribe or nation. But besides this, this catholicity is the very characteristic which it would be most difficult to account for on the supposition of its human origin. The apostles were Jews, the very name for all that is narrow, national and exclusive; how could the most enlarged and comprehensive system of religion owe its origin to such men? We know that the apostles retained much of the narrow and exclusive spirit of their countrymen, as long as their Master was upon earth. When he died they were ready to despair, saying, We trusted it had been He who would have redeemed Israel. Even after his resurrection their eyes were still but half opened, for the last question which they put to him was, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore the kingdom unto Israel? Yet, a few days afterward, these same men began to preach that the kingdom of Christ was a spiritual kingdom, not designed specially for Israel, but for all mankind. This fact admits of no other solution than that recorded in the Acts, after the apostles had received the promised effusion of the Spirit; they spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost, making it apparent that the Gospel is not the product of Jewish minds, but of men divinely instructed and inspired.

This argument may be viewed in another light.

The revelations of God, as contained in the Scriptures, admit of being divided into three portions: those written before the advent of Christ; those referring to his personal ministry on earth; and those written after the effusion of the Spirit, on the day of Pentecost. In the first portion, all, at first view, is national and exclusive; the prosperity of Jerusalem and the exaltation of the Jews would seem to be the great subject of prophecy and promise; still there is a constant gleaming through of the imprisoned glory; constantly recurring intimations of a spiritual Jerusalem and of a spiritual Israel, in whom the glorious things spoken of Zion were to meet their accomplishment.

The personal instructions of our Saviour were conveyed mostly in parables, designed to correct the misapprehension and to repress the false expectations of his countrymen, but rather intimating than fully disclosing the nature of his kingdom and the design of his mission. The descent of the Holy Spirit shed a flood of light on the whole series of divine revelations, back even to the first promise made to our first parents; it is the clear exhibition of the economy of redemption, made in the books written after the day of Pentecost, that enables us to read the outlines of the gospel in the law and the prophets; the relation of these several portions of the Scriptures to each other, written at intervals during the course of fifteen hundred years, shows that the whole is the work of one omniscient Spirit; and the fact that the catholic spirit of the gospel, as unfolded in the later books of the New Testament, is in apparent contradiction, though real agreement

with the earlier portions of the Word of God, is a decisive proof that the Bible is indeed the word of God and not the word of man.

2. If the gospel, as has been represented, is designed and suited for all men, it is suited to us. We need the salvation which it reveals; we, being destitute of any righteousness of our own, must accept the righteousness which the gospel offers, or perish in our sins. That righteousness being all that any sinner needs, and being freely and sincerely offered to all who hear the Gospel, we are entirely without excuse if we refuse or neglect the invitations of mercy.

3. If the gospel is suited to all men, it should be maintained wherever it is known, and sent wherever it has not yet been preached. This is the inference which the apostle draws from this subject. If there is no difference between the Jew and Greek; if the same Lord is rich towards all who call upon him, then it is the will of God that all should call upon him. But how shall they call on him on whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe on him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach except they be sent? The Gospel being suited to all men, and being needed by all, not for their temporal well-being, but for their eternal salvation, woe is us if we do not make it known; it is an inheritance in which we are but joint heirs with all mankind, and we cannot keep the knowledge of this inheritance to ourselves without manifest injustice and cruelty.

Let us, then, endeavour to enter more fully into

the catholic spirit of the gospel; let us remember that the unsearchable riches that are in Christ Jesus are an inheritance for all the poor and perishing; and while we thankfully apprehend those riches for ourselves, let us labour that they may be made accessible to all mankind.